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contents

COVER: *The Exile's Return*, by Charles Keegan. RIGHT: Johnny Depp and Orlando Bloom return in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*. BELOW: Brandon Routh in *Superman Returns*.

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departments

6 CONTRIBUTORS

8 MOVIES
By Resa Nelson
Director Bryan Singer hopes fans like a simple superhero living in a complex world.

16 FOLKROOTS
By Midori Snyder
The journey of the armless maiden begins with despair and ends with self-restoration.

28 BOOKS
By Gahan Wilson and Paul Witcover
Science plays a small part in science-fiction, according to Clark Ashton Smith.

60 GALLERY
By Karen Haber
Featuring the art of John Picacio, taking inspiration from a career in architecture.

80 GAMES
By Eric T. Baker
New RPGs blend classic tales with new environments and updated graphics.

fiction

40 GRAND MAL REAPER
By Scott William Carter
We never know why things happen the way they do, but maybe we can find a way to make them mean something in the end.

46 OF METAL MEN
By Ken Scholes
Great powers can call down great distinction, so great that sometimes even the weapons might weep.

52 COLD DRAKE
By Renee Bennett
What we are is determined by what we do, not by where we come from.

56 HERO
By Darrell Schweitzer
When the line between love and hate, truth and lies, devotion and madness, becomes too thin, we may find ourselves in an unknown country.

66 TRUE NORTH
By K.D. Wentworth
The exploration of adolescence can be dangerous, and some kids never come back from them, or come back changed. But the lucky ones come back with a precious gift.

76 INDIGO
By E. Catherine Tobler
can we ever really escape our pasts or our futures? It all depends on how far you're willing to go.

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contributors

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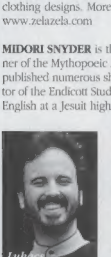
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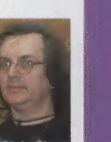
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DEALER INQUIRES WELCOME!

By Resa Nelson

Director Bryan Singer gives fans a simple superhero living in a complex world.

Director Bryan Singer burst onto the cinema scene in 1995 with the breakout hit, *The Usual Suspects*. His success continued with *X-Men* and *X2: X-Men United*. Considering his track record, it would be easy for fans to assume that Singer likes to make grim, brooding films. That's why it's surprising that his latest project is *Superman Returns*, slated for release on June 30 from Warner Bros. Pictures.

"For me, it's the most emotional film I've done and the most romantic, and I'm very proud of that fact," Singer says. "I think it will surprise some of my friends who are used to my darker sensibilities. Whether you're 8 or 80, you'll enjoy the picture."

Singer is a long-time fan of the man from the planet Krypton, who is history's very first superhero. Originally created in comic-book form by Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, Superman was an instant hit, serving as the inspiration for all superheroes who followed.

But ever since the technology explosion of visual effects began, Hollywood anxiously has anticipated a Superman movie that's even more realistic. Other directors first signed up for the project only to back out. At one point, rumors circulated that Nicholas Cage was destined to become the next Man of Steel, but nothing ever came of it. The project languished for years, and it seemed like the movies audiences would never see another Superman.

ABOVE: Michael Dougherty and Dan Harris come together to bring the Man of Steel to the big screen. RIGHT: Kate Bosworth gives life to a more modern Lois Lane.

All the while, Singer had an idea bubbling in the back of his mind. At one point, Warner Brothers offered the job of revitalizing Superman to Singer, but he turned it down because he didn't like the script he was asked to direct. He wanted to tell a new kind of Superman story, something that had never been done on screen before. He had a better idea, and he wasn't interested unless he could follow his own vision. "The idea that has developed over a number of years, before I got involved, was a remake of the first film that altered the mythology a bit," Singer says. "I didn't want to try to retell the Superman

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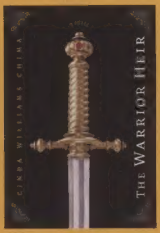

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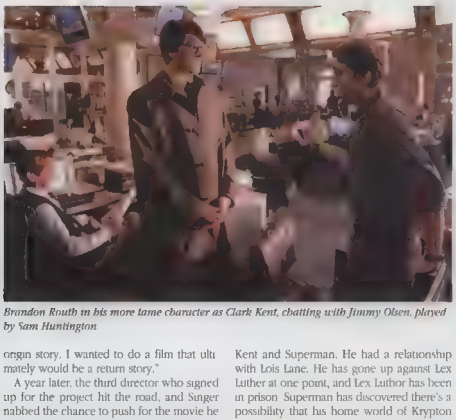


Brandon Routh in his more tame character as Clark Kent, chatting with Jimmy Olsen, played by Sam Huntington

origin story. I wanted to do a film that ultimately would be a return story."

A year later, the third director who signed up for the project hit the road, and Singer nabbed the chance to push for the movie he wanted to make. This time, the studio was ready to listen, and everyone liked what they heard.

I think it's a cool story," Singer says. "It captures a lot of the classic memories of Superman and yet presents a modern story.

The idea is that Superman has already come to Earth, grown up, and existed in Metropolis and at the Daily Planet as Clark Kent and Superman. He had a relationship with Lois Lane. He has gone up against Lex Luthor at one point, and Lex Luthor has been in prison. Superman has discovered there's a possibility that his home world of Krypton may exist in some form and he leaves Earth on a search for some kind of closure. Upon returning five years later, he finds that the world has moved on, and so has Lois Lane. It's a story about Superman reclaiming his place in the world and in the life of Lois Lane."

In other words, Singer has created a story that reflects today's world. When Superman leaves the planet, Lois Lane (played by Kate Bosworth of *Beyond the Sea* and *Blue Crush*) doesn't spend five years pining for the man who got away. Instead, by the time Superman returns, Lois is engaged to Richard (played by James Marsden of *X-Men* and *X 2*), who is the nephew of Perry White (played by Frank Langella of *Dracula* and TV's *Unscripted*), the chief editor of the Daily Planet, where Lois and Clark work. But a diamond ring isn't all that binds Lois to Richard. They also have a son.

That becomes a fundamentally unique obstacle," Singer says. "With the exception of Kryptonite, there's not much that Superman can't overcome. The notion of Lois Lane moving on in Superman's absence in such a definitive way became one of the few obstacles I could imagine. Even Superman can't overcome it. He gets into entanglements with her changed personality and her progression on a personal level. It's that awkward situation of a single mother dealing with what happens when an old boyfriend comes back into her life at a time where a marriage can be often tenuous and tainted as nontraditional.

"On a broader level, he confronts Lex Luthor, who has a diabolical plan."

Luthor (played by Kevin Spacey of *K-PAX* and *American Beauty*), Superman's long-time enemy, plots to render the superhero permanently powerless. When not battling Luthor, Superman struggles to find a way to bridge the distance he feels both with Lois and a society that has figured out how to get along without him.

The long delay in getting this movie off the ground has probably worked out for the best because of the way in which the world

SUMMER'S OTHER FANTASY MOVIES | BY RESA NELSON

On July 7, Johnny Depp returns as Captain Jack Sparrow in ***Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*** from Walt Disney Pictures. He's in debt to Davey Jones, the captain of the ghost ship, the Flying Dutchman. If Jack can't pay off his debt, he must spend his life after death as a servant. Meanwhile, Will Turner (played by Orlando Bloom) and Elizabeth Swann (played by Keira Knightley) attempt to get married, only to get pulled into Jack's misadventures once again.

Kristen Bell (TV's *Veronica Mars*) stars in ***Pulse***, a horror film due in theaters on July 14 from The Weinstein Company. *Pulse* is based on the 2001 Japanese flick by Kiyoshi Kurosawa (*Seance*, *Bright Future*) and is another American remake of today's popular Japanese ghost movies like *The Ring*. Co-written by Wes Craven (director of *Red Eve* and the *Scream* movies), *Pulse* takes the concept of computers being infected by viruses to a new level. In the film, common wireless technology connect reality to the realm of ghosts. An evil spirit uses that technology to worm its way into our realm. Once the connection is made between the real world and the other side, it's permanent. Whenever people use a cell phone or log on to read e-mail, they get infected with a virus that drains them of their vitality and will to live. Soon after, they sink deeper and deeper into depression until they commit suicide.

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest

Pulse

The story follows a group of college students who find out that a computer hacker has pirated a strange wireless signal. When one of their friends suddenly kills himself only to reappear as a ghostly image on a computer screen, the students race to find a way to try to stop the deadly virus.

M. Night Shyamalan (*The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, *Signs*, *The Village*) came up with a bedtime story for his children. Now a Warner Brothers film,

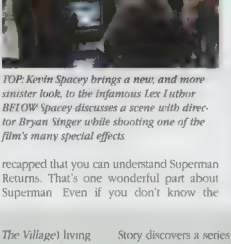
has changed during the past five years Singer's vision reflects his opinion of what audiences need

In a world of such socio-political cynicism, people are more interested in seeing a hero who's idealistic and black-and-white like Superman," Singer says, "instead of characters like X-Men and Spiderman, who are more angst ridden. I think more than ever, people will welcome an idealistic character

"Instead of having cynical superheroes existing in a simple world, you have a simple superhero existing in a complex world. I think the time is very ripe for that. Like in the '70s, we're experiencing a bit of social upheaval, whether it's overseas or here in the United States. There's a lot of conflict over what we as a people and a world should be doing. Just like during the second World War, people very much welcome a breath of fresh air. Something positive and idealistic.

"At our hearts as human beings and as Americans, even though we don't always make the right decisions, we like to believe we're inherently good. That idealism is embodied by Superman. And yet for Americans it's particularly interesting, because he's the ultimate immigrant. He came to this country and was raised in the heartland of America, and yet he carries with him a heritage from another place. He wears that heritage with pride and then at times he blends in with us."

At the same time, Singer is mindful of previous versions of his beloved superhero. Superman Returns respects what Richard Donner created in the '70s," he says, "but even if you haven't seen that film, there's enough



TOP: Kevin Spacey brings a new, and more sinister look, to the infamous Lex Luthor BELOW Spacey discusses a scene with director Bryan Singer while shooting one of the film's many special effects

recapped that you can understand Superman Returns. That's one wonderful part about Superman. Even if you don't know the specifics and the minutia behind the character, you know enough about who Superman is, growing up as a child. Through just the ubiquitousness of his character, there's a starting-off point for the story."

One of the greatest challenges that Singer faced was casting the actor to play Superman in the new millennium. It's a task he describes as "extremely difficult." Luckily for Singer, he's shown a knack for casting over the years.

"There are a lot of handsome actors," says Singer. "But there's another quality that has to go beyond a fine actor and one that has a good, strong physical presence. There's something that's intangible. The character has to look and feel as though he stepped out of your collective memory of who Superman is. Something between the comic book, George Reeves, Christopher Reeve, and who he is in your sense memory. A lot of that has to do with the palette of the actor, the physical properties, and also the essence of the actor, of the person himself.

"I looked at a lot of tapes, I met a number of people, and eventually found Brandon Routh. I always knew I was going to cast an unknown. That was very important. I think stars come with too much baggage for this particular character."

With a budget rumored to be just under $200 million, *Superman Returns* is poised to be the biggest blockbuster of the summer, packed with 1400 visual effects. While most major films require only a few months of shooting, Singer spent half a year behind the camera in Australia. He has also played a role in the development of the video game based on his movie, as well as related merchandise.

Lady in the Water will hit theaters on July 21.

Paul Giamatti (*Sideways*) stars as Cleveland Heep, a man who tries to blend in with the woodwork at the Cove apartment complex. One day he discovers a mysterious woman named Story (Bryce Dallas Howard of *The Village*) living in the passageways under the complex's swimming pool. But Story isn't what she seems to be. Cleveland finds out that she's a nymph-like fantasy creature from a bedtime story, called a "narf."

Story is trapped in our world and desperately wants to return to her own magical land. However, it's a dangerous journey and she hesitates to make it. To make matters worse, she's being stalked by monsters trying to stop her in her tracks.

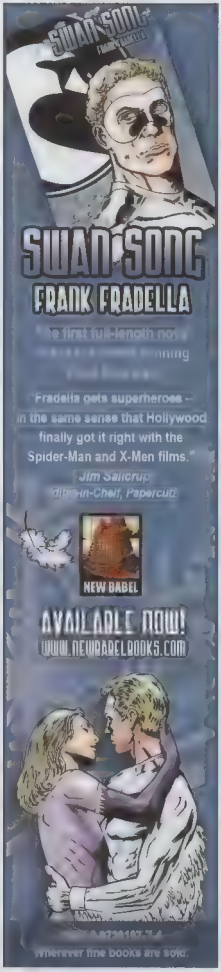
However, there's something in her favor. Story has unique powers of perception that reveal the fate of the people who live in the Cove apartment complex, and they begin to discover powers of their own. Their destinies are tied to Story's own fate. Time grows short for Story—if she doesn't find a way to go back to her world soon, that chance will be gone forever.

Story discovers a series of codes that can set her free. Cleveland and his neighbors put their own lives at risk to help her decipher those codes. Demons follow Cleveland into the Cove, and he must face them to play his part in saving Story's magical world and his own.

On August 4, Calista Flockhart (TV's *Ally McBeal*) stars in ***Fragile: A Ghost Story*** from MGM. The story takes place at Mercy Falls Children's Hospital, a 100-year old facility that is scheduled to go out of business. Before that can happen, all of its young patients must be shipped off to other hospitals. But that process is delayed when a railroad accident injures so many people that all the other hospital beds fill up, leaving no room for the children who need to be transferred. For now, they must remain at Mercy Falls.

The problem is that the children's hospital is already being dismantled, and most of its staff has left. Flockhart plays Amy, a young nurse from London sent to help the understaffed hospital. Amy soon finds out that the children at Mercy Falls are afraid of a mysterious apparition they call "the mechanical girl." They say it lives up on the third floor, which has been closed off from the rest of the hospital for the past 40 years.

Amy struggles solve the mystery of the mechanical girl while trying to keep her young patients safe from attacks that seem intended to keep them admitted to Mercy Falls forever.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It'll be one of the largest cross-promotions Warner Brothers has done in their history," he says. "It has a huge merchandising element, and I want to be very hands-on to make sure that *Superman* is a cool brand and is not misrepresented during this campaign, that it maintains a synergy with the movie.

Singer has been a very busy man. While in Australia, he directed the filming for 13 hours each day, spent two hours each night in the editing room, and then set his alarm clock for 3:00 AM to work long-distance on *The Triangle* miniseries that premiered on the SCI FI Channel last year. You'd think that Superman would have worn out his welcome in the Singer household by now.

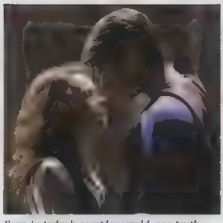
Not so. Maybe Singer has picked up some super-strength by osmosis. Even after a grueling year in Australia (spent scouting, preparation, and filming), Singer still bubbles with enthusiasm. He's on a Superman high that seems to know no bounds. After shooting the movie, Singer came up with a new idea: he decided to produce a documentary about Superman. *Look Up In The Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman* is likely to air on television sometime in June, may see a brief theatrical release, and also will be released in June on DVD. The feature-length documentary is about the history of Superman and how he has survived 80 years of American history.

"There are so many things I didn't realize," Singer says. "The character has lasted through many incarnations and all over the world through various times. Before Superman, there were comic characters, but they were all characters of fighting crime or exploring."

Because he was the first comic character to embody superpowers, Superman changed history. He first appeared in *Action Comics* in 1938. The concept of a superhero was revolutionary, and that first comic book flew off the shelves.

Max Fleischer, the cartoonist who gained fame by creating *Betty Boop*, soon joined the revolution. He made several Superman cartoons with an art deco feel that played in theaters in the 1940s. In the early days of cinema, short cartoons often played before the feature began, and that's how the superhero launched his film career. George Reeves starred in *Superman and the Mole-Men* in 1951. That movie's success spawned the first Superman TV series, *The Adventures of Superman*, in the 1950s. The film series caught its second wind in the 1970s and 1980s. Superman has been a mainstay on the Saturday morning cartoon lineup for many years but returned to primetime in the 1990s and beyond.

"The character has always reflected the times," Singer continues. "During the second World War, he was a tool for propaganda. In the '50s he became a television icon. And then he was resurrected in the '70s with motion pictures. The torch carries on with *Lois and Clark* and *Smallville* on television, and now here we are in the millennium looking at the same character. It's an interesting legacy."



Even in today's complex world, one truth remains: the superhero always gets the girl.

Singer partnered with an old friend to produce the documentary for Warner Brothers. Kevin Burns, whose documentaries include *George Lucas: Empire of Dreams*, *Cleopatra: The Film That Changed Hollywood*, and *The Last Days of Marilyn Monroe*.

Singer had already tapped into the rich history of Superman while conducting research to prepare for his role as the director of *Superman Returns*. "Instead of shying away from that history," he says, "I thought it was important to step back and explore the history of the character and why he survived and became so ubiquitous. Kids, even at a young age, who have never even seen a Superman cartoon or movie, they know what Superman is. It's almost genetic.

"It's been quite a fulfilling compendium to making the Superman movie and to respect a history that has come long before I was born and will exist probably long after I'm dead."

The documentary draws from more than 50 interviews, plus unique images and long-forgotten radio broadcasts.

"I looked at a rough cut, and it's really astonishing," Singer says about the documentary. "I've been involved in the writing and development of it. It's mind-boggling. It's fun. Even though it's a documentary, there's a lot of eye candy: it's the birth, the death, the re-birth, and the continuation of the character."

The documentary also showcases archival and behind the-scenes footage of early versions of Superman, including some that have never been made public before now. The material ranges from the sublime to the bizarre, including a Superman musical and a strange TV show called *The Adventures of SuperPup*.

"After George Reeves played Superman in the '50s and committed suicide," Singer says, "someone thought it would be a good idea to use all the sets from the original Superman series. But instead of populating it with actors, they populated it with little people and dressed them up in dog suits. It's a very rare piece of film.

"If Superman can survive that, it can probably survive anything." ❧

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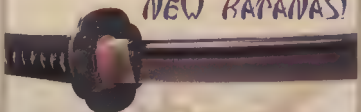

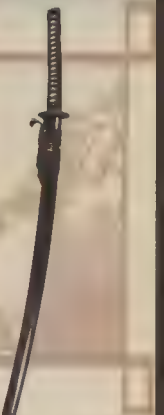

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By Midori Snyder

The journey of the armless maiden begins with despair and ends with self-restoration.

In hero narratives, a young man leaves the familiar home of his birth and ventures into the unknown world where the fantastic awaits him. Along the journey, his worth as a man and as a hero is tested. But when the trials are done, he returns home in triumph, bringing to his society newfound knowledge, maturity, and often a magical bride. The transformation of the young man into a responsible adult is sealed when the hero marries his magical bride and assumes kingship.

While no less heroic, the journeys of young women are far different. In folktales, the rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood is confirmed by marriage and the assumption of adult roles. In traditional exogamous societies, young women were required to leave forever the familiar home of their birth and become brides in foreign and sometimes faraway households. In the folktales, a young girl ventures or is turned out into the ambiguous world of the fantastic, knowing she will never return home. Instead at the end of a perilous and solitary journey, she arrives at a new village or kingdom. There, disguised as a dirty-faced servant, a scullery maid, or a goose girl, she completes her initiation as an adult and like her male counterpart, brings to her new community the gifts of knowledge, maturity, and fertility.

Oil on canvas painting by Jeanie Tomanek, "The Handless Maiden."

In the language of folktales, abstract ideas are represented by concrete and emotionally evocative images. Traditional storytellers use terrifying events to create the emotional experience of grief and abandonment, in which a young woman is not only set out on her journey away from home, but assured of the impossibility of ever returning. In the "Armless Maiden" narratives, a girl is mutilated by a trusted family member and then thrust like a wounded animal into the forest. There can be no return to a childhood home corrupted by such cruel violence. The girl must move forward in her journey to a new destination where she will reconstruct not only her severed arms but her identity as an adult woman as well.

My first experience with the "Armless Maiden" was reading a powerful Xhosa version of the tale, "A Father Cuts Off His Daughter's Arms," performed by Mrs. Nongenile Masithatu Zenani, a Xhosa storyteller from South Africa, and translated by Harold Schueb. In this version a widowed father chooses not to remarry and relies on his young daughter to perform his wife's household duties of cooking and cleaning. When the girl reaches puberty, he attempts to coerce his daughter into filling the sexual role of his deceased wife as well. The girl steadfastly refuses his advances, bursting into noisy weeping that threatens to alert the neighbors. The next day the father takes her into the woods. Once again he demands that she have sex with him. When she again refuses, he cuts off her arms with a knife and leaves her in the woods to die. Bleeding and in tremendous pain, the girl suffers in solitude until hunger forces her to feet. Dazed, she begins to wander through an "endless forest, ascending and descending."

Finally the armless girl reaches a walled homestead. Dropping to her knees, she crawls through a hole in the wall and rolls her body into the garden where she feeds like an animal on fallen corn and peaches. For three days, unable to stand without her arms, she rolls through the garden eating from the ground until servants discover her, mud-covered and filthy, and mistake her for a wild pig. They bring

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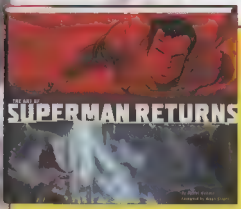

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Henry J. Ford shows us how the one-handed maiden now can perform her motherly duties, such as teaching her child

the dogs to attack her, but her cries stop them. The armless maiden is required to delineate the story of her father's crime three times before she is rescued and brought into the homestead. Once bathed, the family realizes that even without her arms the girl is beautiful, and she is soon married to their son. At first this seems a resolution, particularly when she gives birth to a child, but gradually problems arise. Without arms, the new mother can not perform the expected domestic duties of a woman, and her in-laws begin to grumble. They want their son to take a second, more suitable wife, but he refuses. Eventually, the husband leaves for the city, looking for work, and his parents, posing as his wife, compose a letter stating she is pregnant again by a man other than her husband. The young woman, unaware of the forged letter, receives two replies. The first is from her husband demanding to know more about her unexpected pregnancy. A second letter arrives almost immediately after the first. This one is written by her father who, after learning of his daughter's survival, pretends to be the husband and threatens to burn her into ashes if she remains at home. The young woman and even her in-laws are sorely troubled by the threatening letter, and reluctantly they tie the baby on her back and allow her to leave the homestead.

The young woman returns to the woods and begins a second journey, ascending and descending the endless forest until, weary and thirsty, she comes upon a lake. As she bends awkwardly to drink, afraid her child may slip from her back and drown, a magic bird appears, and with a splash from each wing, restores her arms. Whole and able to do tasks for herself, the young mother jubilantly cares for her child: nursing the baby, bathing her, dressing her, pinching her until she cries, and then comforting the child in the shelter of her newly restored arms. And when the woman is satisfied, she reties the baby on her back and returns, not to her husband's home, but to the neighbors. There she waits until her in-laws learn of her return and come to visit. Astonished by her transformation, they beg her forgiveness and desire only to write on her behalf to their son. But the young man is already on his way home, worried about his wife and child, convinced that something is terribly wrong. It takes a while, but slowly the tangled knot of forged letters is unraveled and the husband declares his love for his wife.

The "Armless Maiden" narrative stayed with me for many years and I found myself hunting down other versions, surprised at the ubiquity of this complicated and violent story. There were versions told all over the world such as "The Girl Without Hands" in Germany, "The Girl With Her Hands Cut Off" in France, "Olive" in Italy, "Dona Bernarda" in Spain, "The Armless Maiden" in Russia, "The Girl Without Arms" in Japan, "Rising Water, Talking Bird, and Weeping Tree" in French Louisiana, and many others. While some were less sexually threatening, most were every bit as gruesome as the Xhosa version: fathers and brothers hacking away the limbs of young girls, either in rage or in payment to the Devil. The girl would survive in the woods, sometimes comforted by the animals, indeed half-animal herself as she rooted for fallen corn or reached her neck to feed on the pears of the Prince's tree. Then there was the rescue as the Prince discovered the girl beneath the mud and matted hair and took pity on the beautiful face. And there would always be that complicated twist in the middle of the story, the exchange of forged letters that forces the armless woman back into nature where the final act of her initiation occurs.

It is a narrative with a strange hiccup in the middle. The brutality of the opening scene seems resolved as the armless maiden is rescued in a garden and then married to a compassionate young man or Prince. But she has not completed her journey of transformation from adolescence to adulthood. She is not whole, not the girl she was nor the woman she was meant to be. The narratives make it clear that without her arms, she is unable to fulfill her role as an adult. She can do nothing for herself, not even care for her own child. Through the exchange of forged letters, conflict is reintroduced into the narrative to send the girl back on her journey of initiation in the woods. There, the fantastic heals her, purifies her in the waters of the lake, and she returns reborn as a woman. Every narrative version concludes with what is in effect, a second marriage. The woman, now whole, her arms restored by an act of magic, has become herself the magic bride, aligned with the creative power of nature. She does not return immediately to her husband but waits with her child in the forest or a neighboring homestead for him to find her. When he comes to propose marriage this second time, it is a marriage of equals, based on respect and not pity.

Although I believe that traditionally the "Armless Maiden" narratives are about female rites of passage to adulthood, within the story is the troubling echo of abuse. Male heroes may be impoverished or temporarily robbed of their royal birthrights, but rarely are they so vindictively mutilated before they are turned out into their journeys. Storytellers know well the constant underlying fear and threat of violence that surrounds the lives of women in their communities from childhood into adulthood. The exploitation of these terrifying images in the narrative may be extreme, but they are the dark threads pulled out of the fab-

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tic of our shared experiences as women. We are repulsed and angered by the brutal actions, not because such events could never happen, but because they frequently do. The fantastic emerges quickly in the story to magically soften the pain of mutilation, and move the audience away from the horror of the event and into the journey of self discovery. Though the terror of the attack is short, as long as the girl remains mutilated, we are reminded of the continuing painful isolation such blows inflict. Survivors of abuse know that isolation well, whether as a child stripped of innocence among those still cloaked, or as an adult unable to bridge the fear of betrayal, and trust in the love of another.

It takes acts of self-determination and power to restore a sense of wholeness.

After abuse. In a Breton version of the "Armless Maiden," the hero is mutilated by her brother in a thorn grove and speaks out against the crime with the calm assurance of a prophet. Armless and bleeding, she tells him the thorn he is about to step on will be removed only by her hand. In that moment of intense pain and betrayal she is able to envision her life restored to wholeness. And what is more, she envisions her forgiveness of this terrible crime. The narrative is not about her survival as a victim, rather it is about her journey as a committed traveler fully aware of her destination.

Illustration by Henry J. Ford for "The One-Handed Girl", sketch titled 'How the Girl Lost her Hand'

The need for restoration and reconciliation are not the armless girl's alone in the versions employing the motif of the thorn grove. Abusers too are isolated by the shame and brutality of their violent acts. The brother (in the thorn grove versions) barely survives in the armless maiden's absence, his body imprisoned and pierced by a punishing vine of thorns that grows from the offending thorn in his heel. When the armless maiden returns to fulfill her prophecy, her transformation from a girl to a woman possessed of creative power is confirmed as she frees her brother from the prison of thorns with the touch of her restored hands. In so doing, she removes forever the corrupting taint of violence, allowing them both to continue in their new lives, unshackled by the past.

The armless maiden continues to haunt the imaginations of modern storytellers, but as something much more than a girl caught in a complex rite of passage to adulthood and marriage. She stands as an icon for the perils of change: the threat of violence that surrounds women's lives, and our own occasional resistance to undertaking the labor of transformation. Whether we choose it for ourselves or have it thrust upon us by circumstances, change demands both an act of undoing, a severing of the past, and an act of reaching, sometimes with little more than faith, for an imagined future. This journey, composed of dangerous and destructive moments, speaks as eloquently about the real potential for failure and the threat of remaining permanently wounded. The exchange of forged letters denigrates the young mother's life and her creative achievements in the birth of her child. If she believes the letters, then she must accept her worthlessness and become an accomplice in her own dehumanization. If she capitulates to this outside voice of authority, if she forgoes the risks of transformation, she remains truncated, alienated from her true creative self.

In her poem "The Girl Without Hands" (published in *Morning in the Burned House*), Margaret Atwood calls the reader to examine her own forgotten journey by the use of the second person voice. You are the modern professional woman walking to work unable, despite "the sunlight pouring over/ the seen world," to be part of the world. Instead, you remain enclosed in a circle "you have made, that clean circle/ of dead space you have made," believing yourself secure in this stagnant prison. Only the armless maiden can understand what it means for you to be so isolated, so out of touch from a full and authentic participation in life. But like the "you" of the poem, Atwood's armless maiden is the a mutilated girl, a girl who has "Everything bled out of her" and who can only reach with "absent hands" to offer comfort. The poem evades the storyteller's promise of restoration, choosing to sympa-

FURTHER READING

FICTION:

"The Armless Maiden" by Midori Snyder, published in *The Armless Maiden and Other Tales for Childhood's Survivors*, edited by Terri Windling (Tor, 1995)

The Handless Maiden, a novel by Lorraine Brown (Doubleday, 1998)

NON-FICTION:

Here All Dwell Free: Stories to Heal the Wounded Feminine by Gertrude Mueller Nelson (Doubleday, 1991)

The Feminine in Fairy Tales by Marie-Louise Von Franz (Shambhala revised. edition, 1993)

The Fisher King and the Handless Maiden by Robert A. Johnson (HarperCollins, October 1993)

ON THE WEB:

"The Girl Without Hands," an annotated version of the fairytale www.surlalunefairytales.com/armlessmaiden/index.html

"The Girl With No Hands" by Rigoberto González, an audio file in which González reads and discusses his poem: www.fishousepoems.org/archives/rigoberto_gonzalez_the_girl_with_no_hands_live.shtm

"Pear," a poem by Nan Fry: www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/rFryPear.html

Healing the Wounded Wild," an essay by Kim Antieau www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/rSilverhands.html

"Old Wives Tales," an essay by Terri Windling: www.endicott-studio.com/gal/galWives/WivesTales.html

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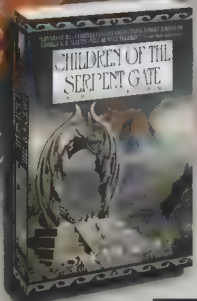

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thize with those who have remained psychologically maimed.

Without the final gift of restoration, only the brutal and numbing violence of the story remains. The shocking metaphor of mutilation in the tale erupted with savage reality in Sierra Leone's Civil War of the 1990's. A decade-long war that killed over 50,000 people, displaced more than 500,000 refugees, and committed unspeakable atrocities on its people also produced a nation of armless maidens. The rebel armies of the RUF, many of them abducted child soldiers who were themselves traumatized victims, instigated a policy of mutilating civilians, even severing the hands and arms of toddlers. Today, although the war is over, a commission for Truth and Reconciliation has been established to address these war crimes. the situation of women in Sierra Leone remains desperate at best. Poverty, illiteracy, and the shame associated with sexual assault and mutilation make it difficult to imagine a society restored to wholeness. And yet, there are glimpses of hope. The recent election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as President of Liberia, a participant country in Sierra Leone's Civil War (and the first woman president of Africa) argues the possibility of change in the lives of West African women. But as in the tale, this second journey, after an interlude of partial healing remains a perilous road, crowded with wounded women and traumatized children, their search for justice comprising the first steps in the creation of genuine peace. For many of these Sierra Leone women only the twin hands of education and economic development will provide healing and a second chance.

The Armless Maiden, despite her vulnerability, her violent history, and her arduous solitary journey, has also inspired a wonderful rebellious and rejuvenating spirit in the new interpretations of her tale in modern poetry. In Rigoberto González's sensual poem "The Girl With No Hands" (published in *The Poets Grimm* edited by Jeanne Marie Beaumont and Claudia Carlson) the armless maiden is one of those rare creatures—a female trickster. The girl completes her severed hands to the stolen good luck charms of desiccated rabbit's feet but plans her own revenge. This is a clever armless maiden. "Resolute, you age with ingenuity, learning to eat right off the branch, nobbling apple, apricot, and pear without separating fruit from stem." She finds pleasure and sex in the garden with a hunter's son: " the piano that's played with elbows and knees and four clumsy heels that for all their random reaching make the sweetest rhythms." This armless girl has no fear of her father, but rather gathers her strength from her trickster heart with a "delectable defiance." She can not only self-generate a second pair of hands, but even more, she has "legs, torso, head, and a bear trap of a jaw to bite the hands that feed her

Continued on page 88

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By Gahan Wilson & Paul Witcover

Science plays a small part in science-fiction, according to Clark Ashton Smith.

It wouldn't be fair if I didn't come right out and confess at the start of this review that I am a devoted fan of Clark Ashton Smith's work and have been ever since I first came across it in the richly scented, pulpy pages of *Weird Tales* and later on expanded and deepened my exposure to it with many repeated readings of his stories in the neat little black bound books of his stories put out by Arkham House way back when.

There was nobody writing the sort of stuff he wrote in those days and it is interesting to observe that many decades later, there is still nobody doing it. There have been plenty who have done their best to mimic various other authors who blossomed during Smith's era, and legions of them have striven mightily to write as much like Robert E. Howard or Howard Phillips Lovecraft as they possibly could, many have actually based their careers on the maneuver, but I am unaware of a single scribe who has dedicated himself to a like effort based on the oeuvre of Clark Ashton Smith.

One grim reason this has been the case could be the work of Smith has never even approached achieving anything at all like the popularity of such as Lovecraft and Howard. I know this to be a bitter truth all too well from a considerable number of personal efforts on my part through the years to encourage a larger reading of this brilliant man's work. I've written introductions for Smith anthologies, done illustrations and covers for his collections, and written any number of essays such as the one you are now reading in an effort to stir up more well-deserved enthusiasm for this brilliant fellow. I don't regret any of those attempts but I do wish they'd been better done since so far at least all these efforts have proven to be totally feckless.

A detail of the cover art for the book, In the Eye of Heaven, *by David Keck. Cover painting by David Grove.*

But enough moaning and groaning. ***Star Changes, the Science Fiction of Clark Ashton Smith*** (edited by Scott Connors and Ron Hilger. Darkside Press, Seattle WA, 231 pages, Trade Hardcover $45.00) is not only a fine collection of Smith's stories of science fiction (more about the "science" part of that later) but Connors and Hilger have done us a great service, and through much research and hard work have managed to remove all of the "improvements" inflicted on them by the editors of the pulp magazines which published them; this includes a number of alterations made by Smith himself since, being both impoverished and responsible for the survival of his sick and aging parents, his unhappy policy was to accede to publishers' instructions. They have painstakingly restored their texts so that we are finally reading what Smith originally wrote. This is a huge service and a great treat, and I hope all who are fond of this delightful author's work gets the chance to read them in Clark Ashton Smith's own words.

Another excellent feature of this book is an introduction by the editors which not only gives the reader a downright painfully clear view of what poor Smith had to contend with in the extremely eccen-

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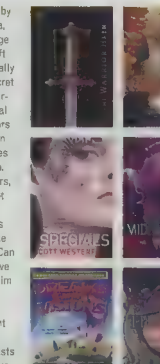
NEW YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS By Michael Jones



The Warrior Heir, by Cinda Williams Chima, Hyperion, 2006. Teenage soccer hero Jack Swift discovers that he's really part of an ancient, secret lineage called the Weirlind, a group of magical guilds who use warriors in duels to the death in order to settle disputes and decide leadership. One of the last warriors, Jack is naturally in hot demand as two rival Houses and numerous free agents try to stake their claim over him. Can his allies keep him alive long enough to train him to his full potential before he's forced to choose a side and fight for his life? Surprises abound as the plot twists and turns, and no one is who they seem to be in this exciting, fresh new story that spans centuries and continents.

Uglies #3: Specials, by Scott Westerfeld. Simon and Schuster, 2006. After being both a rebellious Ugly and a bubble-headed Pretty, now Tally is one of the Specials, augmented humans who maintain the dubious status quo. She'll have to overcome her programming and defy her masters if she wants to effect true change in their post-Apocalypt c not-so-Utop an society. But is she strong enough to rewrite her own mind and choose her own destiny yet again? Once again Westerfeld tells a great story.

Dreams and Visions edited by M. Jerry Weiss and Helen S. Weiss. Starscape 2006. Fourteen authors tell all-new stories of fantasy and science fiction in this collection aimed at young adults. Charles de Lint visits the Newford of 1967 to tell a romance in "Dharma." Suzanne Fisher Staples examines duty, obligation and destiny in the tale of an American-raised teenager forced to return to Pakistan after his grandfather dies in "Jameel and the House of Djinn." Joan Bauer's writer protagonist suffers a creative block in "Blocked." Rich Wallace's "Allegro" sees two teenagers on the track team come together through an inexplicable connection. In Dave Lubar's "Abra-Ca-Deboran," a female magician struggles against the prejudice of her male peers. Tamora Pierce examines the true nature of power in a society where women are oppressed, in "The Hidden Girls." Other stories by Mel Glenn, Patrice Kindl, John Ritter, S.L. Rottman, Neal Shusterman, Nancy Springer, Michael Tunnell, and Sharon Dennis Wyeth round out a thoroughly pleasing, eclectic anthology that's high y worth check ng out.

Midnighters #3: Blue Noon, by Scott Westerfeld, Eos, 2006. The midnighters of Bixby, Oklahoma, face their greatest challenge yet when they realize the secret 25th hour is about to spill over into the daylight world, unleashing hordes of ancient, hungry monsters on an unsuspecting populace unprepared for such an event. Only together can the five teens use their special abilities to prevent a disaster, but at what cost? A rousing conclusion to this spellbinding trilogy leaves plenty of room for a follow-up.

The Cronus Chronicles #1: The Shadow Thieves by Anne Ursu, Atheneum 2006. As teenagers fall ill around them, it's up to Charlotte and her English cousin Zee to embark upon a quest to the Underworld, where they'll battle harpies, resist dark temptations, and confront Hades himself. Can they prevent a horrible rebellion in the land of the dead, and make it home in time for dinner? A quirky, charming story that utilizes Greek myth to great effect, mixing horror, humor, and fantasy adeptly.

Grail Quest #1: The Camelot Spell, by Laura Anne Gilman. HarperCollins, 2006. When every adult in Camelot falls into an enchanted slumber, only a squire, a maidservant have what it takes to journey across the land, find Merlin, and save the day. Monsters, dangers, and challenges galore await the trio as they learn to work together along the way. Gilman's definitely off to a strong start with this series, which reimagines the Arthurian mythos just enough to feel fresh and inviting.

Golden, by Cameron Dokey. Simon Pulse, 2006. In this retelling of Rapunzel, a girl born without any hair whatsoever becomes the adopted daughter to a witch whose darkest secrets are about to come back to haunt her. Can Rapunzel figure out the secret of the witch's tower before time runs out for her and the witch's true daughter, Rue? This is a worthy spin on the popular fairytale, taking the familiar and turning it inside-out in the latest in Pulse's "Once Upon A Time..." series.

tinc and sometimes highly unkind world of pulp magazine publishing, but details the really amusing problems Smith had in dealing with and trying to observe the niceties of science fiction's sometimes imaginary differences with fantasy, and his only marginally successful efforts to adapt to many of the field's basic contentions.

The worst and most persistent stumbling block was that popular science fiction in those days had departed from the sometimes very dark orientation of that genre's founders such as H. G. Wells (odd how many of these people had tripart initials!) and taken a touchingly positive stance towards mankind's lunging into the cosmic abyss of space. The heroes and heroines very much tended to be healthy, strapping creatures with thoroughly positive outlooks who took on the challenges presented by technical difficulties and multiple-tentacled monsters with a gusto and enthusiasm which inevitably carried the day and advanced the cause.

Smith, on the other hand, tended to view the conquest of space as a fundamentally dubious notion and his heroes were often apprehensive, if not downright panicky, when confronted by human devouring aliens. And instead of viewing space exploration as a glorious activity by a species clearly meant to rule the universe, it was painfully obvious he was profoundly convinced the whole effort would be a minuscule event which would be barely noticed if it was observed at all, and do nothing to halt the eventual extinction of our inconsequential life form.

As if this were not enough, the editors of this very good book present a lovely quote from Smith, new to me, which reveals, as if by a flash of lightning, that he regarded science itself (forget the fiction) as rather small potatoes. Here it is: "The mythology of science is not one that intrigues me very deeply."

I love it.

So, if by some unfortunate circumstance, you have not yet encountered the stories of Clark Ashton Smith, *Star Changes* will provide you with an excellent introduction to their genuinely haunting awesomeness, their gracious humor, and their considerable profundity.

It would be a pity if you missed it.

ZIPPY/Type Z Personality, by Bill Griffith, Fanatagraphic Books, Seattle, WA, 127 pages, Trade Paperback, $19.95

Speaking of odd points of view, I have several times in these little essays made a

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point to now and then call your attention to the latest annual collection of the very hilarious, deeply compassionate, and genuinely therapeutic comic strip *Zippy* gathered up and introduced by artist and author, Bill Griffith

I am particularly happy to do it this time because, ladies and gentlemen, in this gathering of the year's past Zippys, the works are presented as part of an educational package which puts in your hands the "E-Z STRIP BY STRIP METHOD," a radical teaching technique that generously offers you clear and simple at-home tests together with instructional texts and helpful commentary which will gently show you how to recognize the 16 tell-tale signs and discover if you have what experts call a "TYPE Z PERSONALITY"

Now you can not only chuckle over these comic strips and occasionally even laugh out loud at them— much to your embarrassment, of course, if you're reading them in public— you can use them as markers to guide your way and find that you need no longer feel "perplexed"

Consider the following questions printed on the cover of this latest "Zippy the Pinhead" collection

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If you have answered "Yes" or even "No" to any or all or even none of these questions I strongly recommend you make every effort to locate and purchase this book Even if it's only to read the comic strips ***Alabaster***, by Caitlin R Kiernan, Subterranean Press. Burton, MI, 171 pages, Deluxe Hard Cover Edition, $25 00

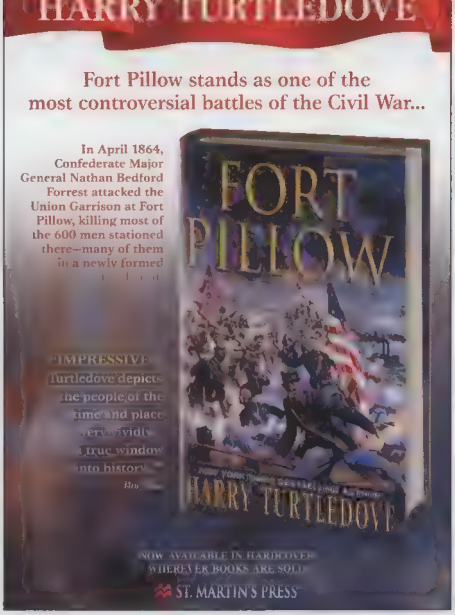
Very good news for those who have encountered and become taken by Caitlin R Kiernan's remarkable character Dancy Flammarion and find themselves wondering whatever became of her, here's a whole little bookful of brand new stories about her collected and very informatively introduced and afterworded by her author

Dancy first showed up in the marvelously spooky novel Threshold, and that might have been this strange albino child's one and only appearance, as the author confesses in her introduction Kiernan was browsing through the novel in the process of composing an essay on how she'd come to write it and found herself reading a list of spectacular monsters her pale little heroine had slaughtered (with the aid of her Angel, a creature which sometimes gives her orders in the shape of a bat winged, besworded figure surrounded by swirling winds but is not above speaking to her whilst cleverly-disguised as a stuffed bear or her own reflection in the fly-specked mirror of a gas station rest room) before her adventures in the novel and decided she really had to write the story of at least one of them a "pretty boy in Savannah who showed Dancy a corked amber bottle that held three thousand ways to suffer, three thousand ways to hurt, before she killed him

Happily this brief reference inspired the short novel "Les Fleurs Empoisonees" which heads up the table of contents in *Alabaster*, a fine collection of beautfully written and genuinely shocking weird tales which should not be missed

By the way, there is an alternate table of contents on which the above story is listed last instead of first because the stories in this second table are listed as they happened chronologically in Dancy's life, not in the order of their composition, although the second tale is somewhat cosmic in time, it also mixes in a related tale from way back in legendary days, along with a touching account of Dancy's mother when she was a child herself and got into all sorts of trouble. I am very glad the author thought to do this as it works extremely well this way, and I strongly suggest this is absolutely how you ought to read them

I also recommend you decide to leave the introduction and afterword for later (but do get around to them as they're extremely amusing and very informative) and allow yourself to get to get to know Dancy's story by story, as one of Kiernan's greatest talents is her fantastic skill in unfolding these spectacular adventures like a magician pulling silks and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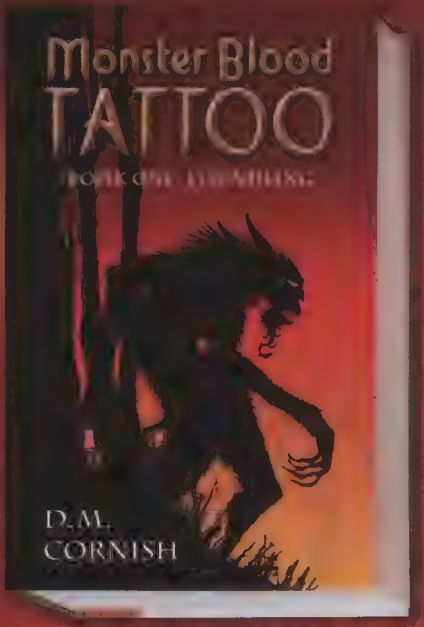

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It is all great fun, and if you've a heart in your breast you'll end up loving Darcy dearly

—*Gahan Wilson*

In the Eye of Heaven, David Keck. Tor, New York, hardcover, 416 pp $25.95, ISBN 0-765-51420-0

David Keck's *In the Eye of Heaven* is the most impressive epic fantasy debut since R Scott Bakker's *The Darkness That Comes Before* What makes this book even more remarkable is that, unlike Bakker, Keck does not eschew the traditional accoutrements of epic fantasy; on the contrary, he embraces them with a vengeance Although set in a seemingly familiar quasi medieval milieu, *Eye of Heaven* quickly demonstrates that in the hands of a talented writer even the familiar can be made strange and new

After long years of training and hardship, Durand, the second son of a middling baron, is about to ascend to knighthood and, so elevated, claim lordship of a small village whose present lord, an elderly knight owing fealty to Durand's father, lost his only son and heir in battle When that son shows up very much alive, the iron weft of reciprocal obligations constituting feudal society leaves the baron no option but to restore the rights of the prodigal son in place of his own. An embittered callow Durand, determined to win for himself what his father could not give him, leaves his family's lands and embarks on the uncertain career of a hedge knight First he must get himself knighted which ceremony the rightful heir prevented, and so he goes in search of a tournament, hoping to impress a lord with his martial prowess, enter into his service, and receive in short order the reward of knighthood

Prior to departing his father's castle, Durand has a portentous encounter with an uncanny form identifying itself as the Traveler, the Prince of Heaven brother to the lord of creation, whose eye, what you and I would call the sun, is referenced in the novel's title The Traveler sees something disconcerting in Durand and in his future but says only that he will achieve success and soon meet the woman of his dreams Later, another encounter leads readers to suspect that Durand may be harboring the soul or spirit of an ancient hero or demigod called Bruna of the Strong Shoulders. Keck is sparing with information about Bruna, the Traveler, and the other Powers, but the little that is told, and the more that can be inferred suggests a richly developed mythos that seems certain to play a larger role as the series continues

Durand falls in with thuggish mercenaries serving Lord Radomor, a cruel and ambitious man with designs on the crown, then, fleeing his service after refusing to participate in an atrocity, joins the retinue of a dashing young lord, Lamoric There he meets the woman of whom the Traveler spoke, who is not what she seems. Meanwhile, events are unfolding that will put the kingdom at risk of invasion by eldritch beings known as the Banished

Durand matures steadily in the hard and unforgiving school to which he has apprenticed himself, and Keck does a marvelous job of tracing his development from a decent-but dangerously impetuous youth to a young man with the beginnings of wisdom, his lofty ideals tempered by intense experience Overall, this unpretentious, quietly exceptional novel, reminded me of Gene Wolfe's *The Wizard*

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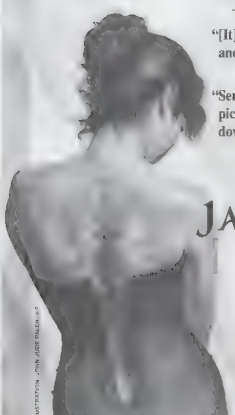

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Knight. Both books take unusual care to be accurate in the details of the chivalric ethos and the down-and-dirty business of medieval combat and are accordingly imbued with a rare aura of authenticity in matters high and low. Both feature magical systems and divine orders derived from Norse mythology then elaborated with sober intelligence and inspired leaps of imagination into frameworks of belief and mystery that are strong enough, and supple enough, to support the complex worlds and characters of their respective authors' invention. Both look past Tolkien to the early Arthurian romances for their literary models. They relate their stories with deceptively simple artistry and reward readers capable of discerning from hints and clues in the text the slowly emerging outlines of a grander design. But where Wolfe's religious faith has increasingly come to the forefront of his work, imparting an allegorical tinge, Keck seems content to place his faith in the inherent logic of his story. I eagerly await the next installment of Durand's adventures.

The Brief History of the Dead, Kevin Brockmeier, Pantheon, New York, hardcover, 212 pp. $22.95, ISBN. 0-375-42369-9.

The opening chapter of *The Brief History of the Dead*, "The City," appeared in *The New Yorker*—not exactly the first place one expects to find fantasy, or even the fifty-ninth, yet there, incredibly, it was, and it was *good*. It is a surreal tour of a city whose inhabitants are all dead, not ectoplasmic ghosts but flesh-and-blood men, women, and children with the bodies they had at the time of their deaths, memories of their previous lives, and no idea where they are, how (beyond dying) they got there, and what if anything might be in store for them. These embodied spirits populate a city composed of remembered bits and pieces of earthly metropolises, a kind of way station between life and afterlife. Despite being dead, the inhabitants of the city have jobs, go shopping, eat dinner, have coffee, fall into and out of love, and so on just as they did while alive. This is a droll conceit at first but becomes quite poignant as the novel progresses. Residence in the city can last a long time, but it is not eternal, like souls in limbo, the citizens ultimately vanish, moving on to whatever awaits them. Brockmeier wisely leaves this mystery unresolved, though it is as much a subject of speculation among his fictional dead as it is among we the living.

A number of recurring characters are introduced in the first chapter, most notably Luka Sims, a newspaperman who continues in that function after death, putting out the *L. Sims News & Speculation Sheet*, and Coleman Kinzler, a blind evangelist. Sims and Kinzler are Brockmeier's touchstones in the city of the dead, along with a third character, Minny Rings, a woman who becomes romantically involved with Sims.

It seems the influx to the city has accelerated of late, as has the egress of residents emigrating to the great beyond. From the stones

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of the newly dead we learn that (1) the novel is set in the near future and (2) a virulent genetically engineered plague, invariably fatal, is responsible. This science fictional veneer is employed mainly for satirical purposes. Brockmeier's real interests lie in the fantastic.

In chapter 2, "The Shelter," we meet the novel's other main character, who is the central character in more ways than one, a young woman named Laura Byrd. Byrd is part of a three person mission to Antarctica, a PR stunt by the Coca Cola company. When a catastrophic equipment failure sends the other two members of her team across the frozen landscape in search of help from a distant research station, she remains behind. When they don't return, she is forced to go after them, beginning a harrowing journey that will test the limits of her endurance and sanity.

Brockmeier tells his story in alternating chapters. As Byrd struggles to survive in the hostile Antarctic environment, she comes to suspect that she may be the last person alive on Earth. Meanwhile, in the city of the dead Sims and others are reaching a similar conclusion, formulating the hypothesis that there are gradations of death, and as long as the dead remain in the memories of the living, they are still in some sense alive: only when they have faded from living memory do they become fully dead, vanishing from the city. Brockmeier artfully brings these two narrative lines into convergence: the one a metaphysical meditation on the importance of memory and human connection, as well as the persistence of the past; the other a gripping adventure in which a woman is physically and psychologically stripped down to her essence. The cumulative effect is powerfully moving, a portrait of devastating loss that is also quietly hopeful in a way I found reminiscent of Connie Willis's novel *Passages*, which approaches the subject from a very different angle yet ends up in the same icy reaches of unfathomable possibility.

City of Saints and Madmen, Jeff VanderMeer, Bantam, New York, trade paperback, 704 pp. $14.00 ISBN 0-553-38357-4

This bravura performance by the almost shamefully talented VanderMeer was originally published in 2002 by Prime Books. Now Bantam, publisher of the author's excellent sf novel, *Veniss Underground*, has released a new "definitive" edition. It's a great opportunity for readers unfamiliar with VanderMeer's moldering, blood-drenched city of Ambergris, home of deadly mushrooms and ambiguous squids, to become acquainted with its many wonders, horrors, and hilarities before the publication of *Shriek: An Afterword*, his highly anticipated follow up. Not precisely a novel, nor exactly a linked collection of short stories, *City of Saints and Madmen* is a literary Rubik's Cube that owes as much to Nabokov and Borges as it does to Lovecraft and M. John Harrison. It is marvelous in every sense of the word.

In the Forest of Forgetting, Theodora Goss, Prime Books, New York, hardcover, 284 pp. $24.95 ISBN 0-809-55691-X

Readers of this magazine need no introduction to Theodora Goss, whose strong first collection, *In the Forest of Forgetting*, contains three stones that originally appeared in these pages, including the title story. Whether elegantly deconstructing a fairy tale, as in "The Rose in Twelve Petals," revisiting childhood fantasies from an adult perspective in the hauntingly evocative "Pip and the Faines," or tracing the adventures of four girls who set out to become witches in what was, for me, the collection's highlight, "Lessons with Miss Gray," Goss writes with subtle delicacy, close observation, and penetrating insight. She is currently working on a novel, with publication of this collection, she will have readers clamoring for her to finish. ❧

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BY SCOTT WILLIAM CARTER · ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREA WUCKLUND

THE GRAND MAL REAPER

WE NEVER KNOW WHY THINGS HAPPEN THE WAY THEY DO, BUT MAYBE WE CAN FIND A WAY TO MAKE THEM MEAN SOMETHING IN THE END.

WE'D BOTH EXCHANGED GLANCES A LOT THE LAST COUPLE OF WEEKS, THE KIND OF GLANCES THAT OFTEN LEAD TO BUYING CONDOMS AND BEER FROM THE MINI-MART IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, BUT I HADN'T THOUGHT ABOUT PURSUING HER UNTIL THAT MOMENT.

SHE STOOD ACROSS FROM ME, HANDS TUCKED INTO THE armpits of her jean jacket, the tear in her nylon stocking looking garish in the pale yellow light. When she glanced at me through the fogging breaths and cigarette smoke, my heart did the skids

Five of us huddled on the snow-covered sidewalk outside the restaurant, Lenny the manager, a couple of waitresses in addition to Rita, and me, a thirty year old busboy who'd only been in Oregon a month. The conversation had turned to our plans for the holiday, and while Lenny and the other waitresses chatted animatedly about turkey dinners with annoying relatives and last-minute shopping for hard-to-find toys, Rita and I hadn't said a word.

We'd been exchanging glances a lot the last couple of weeks, the kind of glances that often lead to buying condoms and beer from the mini-mart in the middle of the night, but I hadn't thought about pursuing her until that moment. I was sure my own eyes had the same look, a what the hell am I doing here sort of a look. I didn't know squat about Rita, nothing except that she was about my age and that she lived on the south side of Rexton out by the golf course, but after that glance I wanted to know everything about her. I wanted to know where she grew up and what movies she liked and why she never smiled. The conversation was winding down, everybody doing the slow sidestep toward their cars, and I was thinking *Don't let her go, ask her stupid, do it now*, but then came the death tugging. Like an invisible cord pulling at my chest.

At first I thought it was a small one. The last year or so I had been getting three to five small ones per day and I had gotten pretty good at suppressing them. But then everything took on an azure glow and I knew that in ten seconds I would be on the ground frothing at the mouth.

I abruptly said goodbye and turned to go, thinking maybe I could make it around the corner, behind the juniper bushes where nobody would see me, but I hadn't made it three steps when the world went dark.

I WAS PULLED OVER BLACK ASPHALT AND ALONG A DOUBLE yellow line straight into a pair of bright lights. I didn't recognize them as headlights at first because they were stacked on top of one another, but as I neared I saw the shape of a black minivan turned on its side. I passed two out-of-focus bodies before I came to an old woman lying flat on her back in the middle of the road, her legs twisted at an awkward angle. A piece of glass was embedded in her forehead and blood was gushing from it, covering her face as if she wore a red mask. She blinked up through the blood.

"The grandchildren," she said, coughing.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I can't help you. I'm not really here—"

"Please."

"You're the only one who can hear me or see me," I insisted, saying the words I had said hundreds of times before. "There's nothing I can do. It sucks. I know. I'm really sorry."

I had long since learned there was no sense in trying to walk away, but I *could* turn, and once I stopped moving I faced the other direction, focusing my eyes on the place where the edge of the road blurred into white fog. There were other voices too, people yelling at one another down the road. She kept talking to me, begging me to tell her if her grandchildren were all right, if they were alive, her voice sounding more gurgled and strained until finally she stopped talking.

I would have covered my ears, but I knew from experience that it would have made no difference. My hands wouldn't block the sound.

THE SNOW FELT COLD AND WET ON THE BACK OF MY HEAD. When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was Rita. She was leaning over me, the streetlamp creating a yellow halo around her curly black hair. I saw Lenny and the others behind her, looking down at me with that particular mix of revulsion and relief I had seen plenty of times throughout my life. I wondered how long it would be before Lenny found a reason to fire me.

"I'm—I'm all right," I said, starting to sit up.

Rita gently placed a hand on my chest. For a small woman she had a surprising amount of strength. "Take it easy, Jimmy," she said.

"Man oh man," Lenny said excitedly, "you gave us quite a scare, Jimbo. I thought maybe I was going to have to give you mouth to mouth but Rita said to just leave you be and it would pass. Shit, you almost gave us a heart attack but she was right." He laughed. "You've got her to thank or you might have had a rude awakening. And everybody around here would have thought I was queer."

He said it as if he expected people to laugh, but nobody did. I imagined kissing Lenny's cigarette-stained lips and had to stifle an urge to retch. It was bad enough with the taste of bile in my mouth as it was. My legs and arms burned as if I had just spent all day in the gym. Rita helped me to a sitting position, and that's when I saw the worst part: the stain in my crotch.

"You're not wearing a bracelet," Rita said.

I couldn't look her in the eyes. "Guess I forgot it," I mumbled. Quickly, I stood and started for the street. "See y'all after the holiday."

I took three steps before the world started to tilt. Rita was there, a hand on my arm.

"I'm giving you a ride," she said.

"No, it's all right," I said. "I can—"

"I wasn't asking," she said.

I WAS FOURTEEN WHEN I HAD MY FIRST SEIZURE, STAYING THE summer in New Ulm, Minnesota. It was one of those sweltering days when you can feel the sweat sticking to your eyelids. Me and Ray Pullman, the red-headed kid who lived next door to my grandparents, were hiding out in his basement playing penny ante poker and drinking Coca Cola out of glass bottles. Having just cleaned Jimmy out of his comic book money, I asked him if he wanted me to keep a tab on his losses.

"Asshole," he said, smiling. He never showed his teeth long because of his braces. "That's you, asshole Peter Parker with the Imperfect Pecker."

I leaned back in the folding chair, feeling the metal stick to my bare back. It was too damn hot for shirts. "And you're asshole Clark Kent with the Boner of Steel," I said. "You can't even walk because your boner is so big."

It was a game we'd been playing all summer. Ray had been a big fan of Superman ever since John Byrne came out with his re-release of the Superman origin story when we were in fourth grade. Ray had every issue since carefully sealed in plastic bags

and backed by cardboard. He wouldn't even let me read them unless I washed my hands first, and even then he watched me the way my father watched me when I was washing his Mercedes. Ray liked Superman, aka Clark Kent, because the guy was pretty much invincible.

Me, I said that's exactly what made Superman boring. Peter Parker had problems just like the rest of us. You could beat him straight up in battle even if you didn't have some stupid green rock. It was because he was imperfect that we could relate to him.

"Well, what do you know," Ray said. "Anybody who leaves their comics sitting all over the floor, getting ripped up and the cats chewing and pissing on them and stuff isn't somebody who knows anything."

That was Ray's way of ending any dispute. A true comic book collector protected his comics, and according to Ray only a true comic book collector could know anything for certain about comics. Since just about everything we talked about came back to comics eventually, that line of reasoning pretty much ensured Ray won every argument.

"This is dumb," I said, putting down the cards. "Wanna go to Baker's Pond?"

Ray shrugged. "Beats smelling your stink all day, I guess."

Twenty minutes later we were in our swimsuits and standing on the grassy bank twenty feet above the pond, the oaks casting a fish-net of shadows over us. Some little kids were on the shallow side, playing with a dirty beach ball, but otherwise we had the pond to ourselves. We came there two or three times a week most summers, and every time we always started with a big jump off the bank.

"Tall buildings in a single bound!" Ray shouted and jumped, cannon-ball style, his red hair making him look like a ball of fire.

His splash was like a mushroom cloud. The little kids screeched and swam for the shore. I wanted to splash the little kiddies too, but I knew better than to jump before Ray surfaced. I had done that once two summers earlier and nearly broken Ray's jaw.

I waited, but Ray didn't show. It wasn't like him. Usually he was up and laughing, swimming hard for the near shore. Thirty seconds passed and still no Ray.

"Yo, Superman!" I shouted. "Stop kidding around!"

As the ripples faded, my pulse quickened. The kiddies were watching me. I was debating about what to do when finally I saw a bit of red hair coming up through the water, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Then I realized that he was face down. And there was blood gleaming on the back of his head.

"Ray!" I screamed.

It would have taken me two or three minutes to navigate the narrow, rock-strewn path down to him, so I decided to jump. I knew there was risk of hitting whatever he had hit, but I thought that if I backed up and gave it a good running start I would land far past him. But as I turned around, something happened—the sun flashed through a crack in the leaves. A lot of people who suffer regular seizures say there's usually a trigger of some sort, flashing lights and pulsing sounds being the key culprits, but this would be the only time I could pinpoint an outside cause. It was nothing, a blip of white light, but I felt the world spinning and going dark. I never felt myself hit the ground.

Suddenly I was hovering directly over the pond. Everything except Ray was blurry and out of focus, fading into a white fog. I heard the little kids screaming. Something tugged at my chest, pulling me downward. As I plummeted toward Ray, I instinctively raised my arms; I had no cause for concern because I passed right through him.

Now I was under the surface of the pond, tiny particles floating in the murky green water. I didn't feel wet or cold. I held my breath, though I would find out later that there was no need for me to do so since I was no longer in my body. The first thing I saw was a couple of black oil drums stacked on top of one another, inches from my feet. The last time we came to the pond, they hadn't been there.

I looked up and there was Ray, eyes closed, blood trickling from his mouth into the water. I reached for him but my hand passed right through.

"Ray!" I shouted.

He didn't move. I shouted his name another dozen times but he never stirred.

RITA DROVE A BLUE TERCEL. A MANUAL TRANSMISSION THAT jerked when she shifted and fishtailed when we hit an icy stretch. There were empty cans of Dr. Pepper and a mud-stained copy of *Vogue* on the floor. The piss in my crotch was going cold, my shorts sticking to my thighs. She had one of those funky tree-shaped air fresheners, and it must have been fairly new because the inside of the car smelled strongly of pine. I was glad.

"You want to listen to some music?" she said, breaking the stillness.

"Sure," I said, though I really didn't. I was thinking about the old woman on the highway. The images flared up in my mind and I forced them away. There was no rhyme or reason to who I saw die or why. She could have been anyone, anywhere. It didn't matter.

When Rita leaned over to turn on the radio, I stole a glance at her. The lines on her face were deeply drawn, but she was pretty in a rugged, worn sort of way.

She asked me where I lived. I told her where my apartment complex was. She started to make small talk about living in Rexton, about the upcoming election, and about other trivial things that people talk about when they don't know what to say, and I nodded and said uh-huh, uh-huh, knowing full well that any chance of us getting romantic then or at any point in the future had died outside the restaurant. This saddened me, and when she eased into the parking spot in front of my apartment, I started to open the car door so I could make a quick getaway. Down the street, a couple of kids threw snowballs at one another under a flickering streetlamp.

"Well, thanks," I said.

"Hey now," she said, placing a hand on my arm.

At her touch I felt a warm shiver pass through my body. I turned and looked at her and saw the way she was looking at me, her brown eyes wide, her lips slightly parted, and it wasn't a brush-off look I was seeing. It was the same kind of look she had been giving me the last few weeks.

"Do you want me to come in?" she asked.

"I'll be all right," I said, still figuring I must have been misreading her intent as one of concern.

"I thought you might not want to be alone."

I laughed. "I spend most of my life alone. It's no biggee. Really."

IT WOULD HAVE TAKEN ME TWO OR THREE MINUTES TO NAVIGATE THE NARROW, ROCK-STREWN PATH DOWN TO HIM, SO I DECIDED TO JUMP. IT WAS NOTHING, A BLIP OF WHITE LIGHT, BUT I FELT THE WORLD SPINNING AND GOING DARK. I NEVER FELT MYSELF HIT THE GROUND.

THE FIRST DEATH I WITNESSED WITH COMPLETE FASCINATION. WHILE MY PARENTS DRAGGED ME TO ONE DOCTOR AFTER ANOTHER, SUBJECTING ME TO EEGS, BLOOD TESTS, AND EVERY UNPRONOUNCEABLE DRUG IMAGINABLE IN AN EFFORT TO "CURE" MY SEIZURES.

"Are you sure? Because I don't have anywhere else I have to be. I could—"

"Do you really want to do this?" I said abruptly

She looked as if I had slapped her across the face. "What do you mean?"

I paused, knowing there was no easy way out now. "I mean, are you sure you want to get mixed up with a guy like me?"

"I was just asking if you wanted some company—"

"We both know where this is leading."

She sighed. "Why does it have to lead somewhere?"

"A guy like me, with my problem, you don't want to get mixed up with that. You have no idea what you're getting into."

"I know exactly what I'm getting into," she said sharply And when I looked at her in surprise, she added, "I was married to an epileptic."

IN THE BEGINNING THE SEIZURES CAME ONCE OR TWICE A week. A little old lady in a nursing home passed in her sleep. A six year-old boy accidentally shot by his older brother flat lined on an operating room table They talked to me and I talked back, but I did n't know if the deaths were real or all in my mind until I watched a pair of hikers freeze to death on a mountain, and then the next day saw the article in the paper with their picture.

Two Die on Oregon's Mount Hood.

That's when I knew I had been given an extraordinary power

That's when I thought I was becoming the world's first real superhero

The first few dozen deaths I witnessed with complete fascination. While my parents dragged me to one doctor after another, subjecting me to EEGs, blood tests, and every unpronounceable drug imaginable all in an effort to "cure" my seizures, I kept silent about my power. Someday, I figured, I would be a full-fledged superhero, and when that time came I probably wouldn't want anyone to know my true identity The fact that I couldn't physically affect anything when I was having one of my visions, or that I couldn't interact with any one other than the person dying, didn't bother me because I thought my powers were just beginning to develop.

But they didn't.

And the more I watched people die, the more I knew for certain that my ability wasn't a gift at all

It was a curse

AGAINST MY BETTER JUDGMENT, I INVITED RITA UP FOR COF- fee While I threw on some new clothes in the next room, she complimented me on my décor. I laughed at my glorified lawn furniture and said yeah, the Salvation Army comes in handy I asked her about her husband, but she demurred, telling me it was a long time ago We talked about movies, books, and places we had been. Turned out Rita had been living out of a suitcase almost as much as me.

"Sounds like you're running from something," I said

She looked at me over her coffee cup, steam rising in front of her eyes. "Why don't you wear a bracelet?"

"Maybe I don't want the seizures to define me What happened to your husband?"

"Maybe I don't want my past to define me You doing any thing tomorrow?"

The next two weeks, Rita and I saw each other almost every night I learned a little about her past She had been born in Iowa, her parents farmers She had gone to school and become a nurse, though she didn't say why she wasn't doing that now She didn't say anything about her husband. I had one more seizure at work, seeing a naked black woman with a grotesquely swollen belly die moaning inside a bamboo hut, but otherwise I fought off the rest Lenny wouldn t look me in the eyes any longer and I figured my pink slip would be forthcoming

I had no intention of telling Rita about my power, but then New Year's Eve we were at her apartment watching the ball drop in New York, and I felt a death tugging ripping at my insides I fought it off, clamping down hard on Rita's hand When the feeling passed, my face was drenched with sweat and my heart was pounding, but I felt exhilarated because it was the strongest one yet I had suppressed

"Are you all right?" Rita asked.

I looked at her, suddenly feeling more alone than I had ever felt. Nat King Cole crooned out *"White Christmas"* from the boom box on her bookshelf, a bookshelf that was bare except for a couple of beat-up paperbacks and some wilted carnations in a cheap plastic vase. Outside, someone was setting off firecrackers.

"I want to tell you something," I said, and told her everything, starting with Ray's death I told her of my time in and out of drug treatment for methamphetamines, of leaving home at seventeen and never looking back, and about the wacky support groups I had tried over the years, including ones that focused on astral projection and near-death experiences. I told her the more painful the death was for the person dying, the stronger the pull on me, meaning that the deaths I did see were usually excruciating to watch

I expected bafflement or skepticism, but she just leaned forward and kissed me I was strong until that moment, but then I was in her arms, burying my face in her chest, her stroking my hair and telling me everything would be all right. We went upstairs and made love on her creaky futon, the ceiling fan droning above us When it was done, she lay naked on top of me, her breasts pressed against my chest, her head nestled under my chin Her hair smelled the way the air smelled after a thunderstorm.

"I always wanted to have super powers," I said, "but I never imagined it would be like this." I laughed. "I'm the Grand Mal Reaper Watch out, because if I get the shakes it might be your time. And don't bother begging for mercy, because there ain't squat I can do about it."

She didn't say anything for a long time, lazily tracing circles on my chest with her fingernail "Maybe there is some good you can do."

"Like what?"

I felt her shrug. "I don't know But I can't believe you would be given a power that was completely useless."

I extricated myself from her arms, sitting up on the edge of the bed "You've got to be kidding."

She sat up beside me, pulling the sheets up so they wrapped around her lower body "I just thought you might find some positives out of it," she said.

"Positives?" I said. The word was like a douse of cold water. I stood, still naked, and faced her. "Do you know the kind of crap I've seen? Life shits on you and then you die. That's just the way it is."

"You don't really believe that."

"Oh yes, I do."

She sighed. "Jimmy, things happen for a reason."

"That's just the kind of crap we tell ourselves so we don't have to think about how meaningless life is."

She nodded sadly. I was shaking, and only partly because of the sweat cooling on my body. I pulled on my clothes. She didn't say anything until I was tying my shoes.

"Crap has happened to me, too," she said.

"Oh yeah, like what?"

"Like my divorce."

She looked small and fragile on the end of the bed, hunched over with her hands wrapped in the sheets, her breasts exposed. Until that moment I hadn't even noticed she was wearing a necklace with a tiny cross.

"Ben was just a goofball," she said. "We grew up together, and he was always hanging around the farm. He had voices for all the animals, and he could make me laugh." She shook her head. "You know the story, right? High school sweethearts and all that. We were married right after high school, and we had a plan. Ben was going to work to put me through school, and then I'd return the favor. And that first year at the University of Iowa, everything seemed to be fine. Then Ben had his first seizure."

I didn't know quite what to say. "How bad was it?"

"Bad. Three or four times a week, at least. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was when he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. I dropped out of school to take care of him. He wasn't even the same person. In the span of five seconds he could go from calling me a whore to calling me his special flower."

"So he left you?"

She laughed sharply. "No, that's the crappy part, see. I was selfish. I didn't want to spend my life taking care of him. He's back home with his parents now. They write me sometimes. They say he asks about me." Her eyes were glistening. "But I still believe that there's a purpose to things, Jimmy. I mean, it *can't* be any other way. It just *can't*."

All at once I understood why she was with me, or at least I thought I did, and I couldn't stop myself from saying so. "Look, I really am sorry about what happened, but if you're looking for closure by being with me it's not going to work. I don't want to be somebody's therapeutic tool."

She swallowed and looked at the floor. "If you think that's why I'm with you, then I think you should go."

I didn't want to go. I wanted to take her in my arms and make love to her and tell her I understood her pain.

But instead I turned and walked out.

WHILE I WAS WASHING DISHES THE NEXT MORNING AT THE restaurant, I felt a couple of death tuggings and I successfully fought them off. I was beginning to think that maybe I had finally beaten the thing. Maybe I could settle down and have a real life. I knew I had been too harsh with Rita, and while I scrubbed the grease-stained pans I thought about how I could make it up to her. But she didn't come in at noon when she was due, and I started to think that maybe she had skipped on to another town.

At a quarter to one Lenny, ashen-faced, entered the kitchen with a clipboard in hand. I thought, here it is, he's finally worked up the nerve to fire me.

"It's Rita," he said. "Somebody just called from the hospital."

He told me her car had been hit by a drunk driver, some fool who had been out partying on New Year's Eve, and she died in the ambulance. I leaned against the counter. He went on to tell me how great a person Rita was, but his voice sounded like it was coming from far away. I was thinking about the death-tuggings I had felt that morning.

How many had there been? Five? Six? I wondered if she had been one of them.

"Was anybody with her?" I asked.

He shook his head. "She was alone."

And I didn't need him to tell me that. I knew the answer when I asked the question.

Some things you just *know*.

THE OLD MAN HAD AN IV ATTACHED TO HIS ARM AND A BREATH-ing tube taped under his nose. The equipment next to him wheezed and beeped, but the old man himself seemed to make no sound. The room was dark except for the triangle of light from the bathroom that spilled onto his bed. His wasted body barely caused a rise in the sheets. As I stepped up to the bed, his eyes cracked open.

"Who are you?" he asked softly.

I knew from how gentle the tugging had been that he wasn't in a lot of pain, and I was glad for that. His eyes moved, following me, but he didn't turn his head.

"My name's Jimmy," I said.

"Are you a doctor?"

"No."

"Good. I'm sick of doctors. They always want to stick something up your ass." He stared at me for a moment. "There's something funny about the way you look. You're all shadowy-like. Are you an angel?"

"No."

"Who are you then?"

"Just somebody sent to be with you."

"Sent? Sent by who? God?"

I laughed. I hadn't intended any religious connection by what I had said, but now I wondered if my subconscious had other ideas. "I don't know."

"Do you believe in God?"

I thought about it for a moment. I realized then that I wasn't doing this just because nobody should die alone, although that was part of it. I was also doing it for me. I was doing it because I had been given a power, and if there was some good I could do with it, even a little, that meant there might have been a reason I had it. I wanted there to be a reason. "I'd like to," I said. "I'm just not sure I can."

He closed his eyes, and I knew, the way I always knew these things, that it would be for the last time.

"Me either," he said. ❧

LIFE. I KNEW I HAD BEEN TOO HARSH WITH RITA,

PANS I THOUGHT ABOUT HOW I COULD MAKE IT UP

SHE WAS DUE.

OF METAL WEB AND SCARLET THREAD

GREAT POWERS CAN CALL DOWN GREAT DISTINCTION, SO GREAT THAT SOMETIMES EVEN

AND DANCING WITH THE SUNRISE

THE WEAPONS MIGHT WEEP · BY KEN SCHOLES · ILLUSTRATION BY ALLEN DOUGLAS

ake and glowing ruins of Windwir. The ground [illegible] pile of blackened bones, [illegible]

nd looked up.

The Gr[illegible]

he ruins.

The [illegible]

[illegible]s left of the Great City of Windwir?

And the Androfrancine Library?

[illegible]

[illegible] "Can you speak?"

"Dew enuq kaeys nas," the metal man said.

Rudolfo looked again to his Gypsy Scouts The same scout who'd spoken earlier looked up. "He's been talking since we found him, Lord. It's no language we've ever heard."

Rudolfo smiled. "Actually, it is." He turned back to the metal man. "Sdrawkcab kaeps," he told him.

A pop, a clunk, a gout of steam. The metal man looked up at Rudolfo, at the smoke-filled sky and the blackened horizon that was once the world's largest city. He shook and shuddered When he spoke, his voice carried a depth of lament that Rudolfo had only heard twice before. "What have I done?" the metal man asked, his breast ringing as he beat it with his metal fist. "Oh, what have I done?"

RUDOLFO RECLINED ON SILK CUSHIONS AND DRANK sweet pear wine, watching the sunset wash the metal man red His own personal armorer bent over the mechanical in the fading light, wiping sweat from his brow while working to re-attach the mangled leg.

"It's no use, lord," the metal man said.

The armorer grunted. "It's nowhere close to good but it will serve." He pushed himself back, glancing up at Rudolfo

Rudolfo nodded. "Stand on it, metal man."

The metal man used his hands to push himself up The mangled leg would not bend It sparked and popped but held as he stood

Rudolfo waved. "Walk about."

The metal man did, jerking and twitching, using the leg more as a prop

Rudolfo sipped his wine and waved the armorer away. "I suppose now I should worry about escape?"

The metal man kept walking, each step becoming more steady. "You wish to escape, lord? You have aided me. Perhaps I may aid you?"

Rudolfo chuckled. "I meant *you*, metal man."

"I will not escape." The metal man hung his head. "I intend to pay fully for my crimes."

Rudolfo raised his eyebrows. "What crimes are those exactly?" Then, remembering his manners but not sure if they extended to mechanicals, he pointed to a nearby stool. "Sit down. Please."

The metal man sat. "I am responsible for the razing of Windwir and the genocide of the Androfrancines, lord. I do not expect a trial. I do not expect mercy. I expect justice."

"What is your name?"

The metal man's golden lids flickered over his jeweled eyes in surprise. "Lord?"

"Your name. What is your name?"

"I am Mechoservitor Number Three, catalog and translations section."

"That's no name. I am Rudolfo, Lord Rudolfo of the Nunefold Forest Houses to some. General Rudolfo of the Wandering Army to others. That Damned Rudolfo to those I've bested in battle or in bed."

The metal man stared at him. His mouth-shutters clicked open and closed.

"Very well," Rudolfo finally said. "I will call you Isaak." He thought about it for a moment, nodded, sipped more wine. "Isaak. Tell me how exactly you managed to raze the Knowledgable City of Windwir and single-handedly wipe out the Androfrancine Order?"

"By careless words, lord, I committed these crimes."

Rudolfo refilled his glass. "Go on."

"Are you familiar, lord, with the Wizard Xhum Y'zir?"

Rudolfo was. He nodded.

"The Androfrancines found a cache of parchments in the Eastern Rises. They bore a striking resemblance to Y'zir's later work including his particular blend of Middle Landlish and Upper V'Ral. Even the handwriting matched."

Rudolfo leaned forward, one hand stroking his long mustache. "These weren't copies?"

The metal man shook his head. "Originals, lord. Naturally, they were brought back to the library. They assigned the translation and cataloging to me."

Rudolfo picked a honeyed fig out of a silver bowl and popped it into his mouth. He chewed around the pit, spitting it into a silk napkin. "You worked in the library."

"Yes, lord."

"Continue."

"One of the parchments contained the missing text for Xhum Y'zir's Seven Cacophonic Deaths—"

Here Rudolfo's breath rushed out. He felt the blood flee so quickly from his face that he tingled. He raised his hand and fell back into the cushions. "Gods, a moment."

The metal man, Isaak, waited.

Rudolfo sat back up, drained off the last of his wine in one swallow and refilled the glass. "The Seven Cacophonic Deaths? You're sure?"

The metal man shook in one great sob. "I am now, lord."

A hundred questions flood Rudolfo. Each shouted to be asked. He opened his mouth to ask the first but closed it when Gregoric, the First Captain of his Gypsy Scouts, slapped into the tent with a worned expression on his face.

"Yes?" he asked.

"General Rudolfo, we've just received word that Overseer Sethbert of the Entrolusian City States approaches."

Rudolfo felt anger rise. "*Just?*"

Gregoric paled. "Their scouts are magicked, Lord."

Rudolfo leaped to his feet, reaching for his thin, long sword. "Bring the camp to Third Alarm," he shouted. He turned on the metal man. "Isaak, you will wait here."

Isaak nodded.

Then General Rudolfo of the Wandering Army, Lord of the Nine fold Forest Houses, raced from the tent bellowing for his armor and horse.

BATTLEFIELDS, RUDOLFO THOUGHT, SHOULD NOT require etiquette nor be considered affairs of state.

He remained mounted at the head of his army while his captains parleyed with the Overseer's captains in a moonlit field between the two camps. On the horizon, Windwir smoldered and stank. At last, they broke from parley and his captains returned.

"Well?" he asked.

"They also received the birds and came to offer assistance."

He sneered. "Came to peck the corpses clean more likely." Rudolfo had no love for the City States, hunkered like obese carrion birds at the delta of the Three Rivers, imposing their tariffs and taxes as if they owned those broad, flat waters and the sea they spilled into. He looked at Gregoric. "And did they share with you why they broke treaty and magicked their scouts at time of peace?"

Gregoric cleared his throat. "They thought that perhaps we had ridden against Windwir and were honoring their kin-clave. I took the liberty of reminding them of our own kin clave with the Androfrancines."

Rudolfo nodded. "So when do I meet with the tremendous sack of moist runt droppings?"

His other captains laughed quietly behind their hands. Gregoric scowled at them. "They will send a bird requesting that you dine with the Overseer and his Lady."

Rudolfo's eyebrows rose. "His Lady?"

Perhaps, he thought, it would not be so ponderous after all.

HE DRESSED IN RAINBOW COLORS, EACH HUE DECLARing one of his houses. He did it himself, waving away assistance but motioning for wine. Isaak sat, unspeaking and unmoving, while Rudolfo wrapped himself in silk robes and scarves and sashes and turban.

"I have a few moments," he told the metal man. "Tell more of your story."

Light deep in those jeweled eyes sparked and caught. "Very well, lord." A click, a clack, a whir. "The parchment containing the missing text of Xhum Y'zir's Seven Cacophonic Deaths came to me for cataloging and translation, naturally."

"Naturally," Rudolfo said.

"I worked under the most careful of circumstances. We kept the new text isolated in a secure location with no danger of the missing words being added to complete the incantation. I was the only mechoservitor to work with the parchment and all knowledge of my previous work with prior fragments was carefully removed."

Rudolfo nodded. "Removed how?"

The metal man tapped his head. "It's.. complex. I do not fully understand it myself. But the Androfrancines write metal scrolls and those metal scrolls determine our capacity, our actions, our inactions, our memories." Isaak shrugged.

Rudolfo studied three different pairs of soft slipper. "Go on."

The metal man sighed. "There is not much more to tell. I catalogued, translated and copied the missing text. I spent three days and three nights with it, calculating and re-calculating my work. In the end, I returned to Brother Charles to have the memory of my work expunged.

Spiders scuttled. Fire fell from sulfur clouds. All seven deaths." He sobbed again.

Rudolfo stroked his beard. "And why do you think this happened?"

The metal man looked up, shaking his head. "I don't know, lord. Malfunction, perhaps."

"Or malfeasance," Rudolfo said. He clapped and Gregoric appeared, slipping out of the night to stand by his side. "I want Isaak here under guard at all times. No one talks to him but me. Do you understand?"

Gregoric nodded. "I understand, General."

Rudolfo turned to the metal man. "Do you understand as well?"

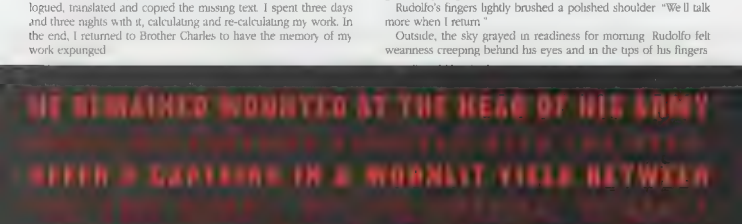
"Yes, lord."

Rudolfo leaned over the metal man to speak quietly in his ear. "Take courage," he said. "It is possible that you were but the tool of someone else's ill-will."

Isaak's words, quoted from the Whymer Bible, surprised him. "Even the plow holds love for splitting the ground; and the sword grief for spilling the blood."

Rudolfo's fingers lightly brushed a polished shoulder. "We'll talk more when I return."

Outside, the sky grayed in readiness for morning. Rudolfo felt weariness creeping behind his eyes and in the tips of his fingers.


HE REMAINED MOUNTED AT THE HEAD OF HIS ARMY
AFTER A CAPTAIN IN A MOONLIT FIELD BETWEEN
SMOLDERING AND ISAAK. AT LAST, THEY BROKE

A sudden thought struck him and Rudolfo raised a hand, unsure why he was so polite with the mechanical. "Is memory of your work always removed?"

Seldom, actually. Only when the work is of a sensitive or dangerous nature."

Remind me to come back to this question later," Rudolfo said. Meanwhile, continue. I must leave soon."

I put the parchment in its safe, left the catalog room and watched the Androfrancine Grav Guard lock it behind me. I returned to Brother Charles but his study was locked. I waited." The metal man whirred and clicked.

Rudolfo selected a sword in an intricate scabbard, thrusting it through his sash. "And?"

The metal man began to shake. Steam poured out of his exhaust grate. His eyes rolled and a high pitched whine emanated from somewhere deep inside.

"And?" Rudolfo said, sharpness creeping into his voice.

And all went blank for a moment. My next memory was standing in the city square, shouting the words of the Seven Cacophonic Deaths—all of the words—into the morning sky. I tried to stop the utterance." He sobbed again, his metal body shuddering and groaning. "I could not stop. I tried but could not stop."

Rudolfo felt the mechanical's grief, sharp and twisting, in his stomach. He stood at the flap of his tent, needing to leave and not knowing what to say.

The metal man continued. "Finally, I reversed my language scroll. But it was too late. The Death Golems came. The Plague.

He had stolen naps here and there but hadn't slept a full night since the message bird's arrival five days before, calling him and his Wandering Army south and west. After the meal, he told himself, He would sleep then.

His eyes lingered on the ruined city painted purple in the predawn light.

"Gods," he whispered. "What an unexpected weapon."

SETHBERT DID NOT MEET HIM AT THE EDGE OF HIS

army. Instead, Rudolfo rode in escort to the massive round tent. He snapped and waved and flashed hand-signs to his Gypsy Scouts, who slipped off to take up positions around the tent.

Sethbert rose when he entered, a tired smile pulling at his long mustache and pock-marked jowls. His Lady rose, too, tall and slim, draped in green riding silks. Her red hair shown like the sunrise. Her blue eyes flashed an amused challenge and she smiled.

"Lord Rudolfo of the Ninefold Forest Houses," the squire at the door announced. "General of the Wandering Army."

He entered, handing his long sword to the squire. "I come in peace to break bread," he said.

"We receive you in peace and offer the wine of gladness to be so well met," Sethbert replied.

Rudolfo nodded and approached the table.

Sethbert clapped him on the back. "Rudolfo, it is good to see you. How long has it been?"

Not long enough, he thought. "Too long," he said. "How are the cities?"

Sethbert shrugged. "The same. We've had a bit of trouble with smugglers but it seems to have sorted itself out."

Rudolfo turned to the lady. She stood a few inches taller than him.

"Yes. My consort, the Lady Jin Li Tam of House Li Tam," Sethbert stressed the word consort and Rudolfo watched her eyes narrow slightly when he said it.

"Lady Tam," Rudolfo said. He took her offered hand and kissed it. His eyes never leaving hers.

She smiled. "Lord Rudolfo."

They all sat and Sethbert clapped three times. Rudolfo heard a clunk and a whir from behind a hanging tapestry. A metal man walked out, carrying a tray with glasses and a carafe of wine. This one was older than Isaak, his edges more box-like and his coloring more copper.

"Fascinating, isn't he?" Sethbert said while the metal man poured wine. He clapped again. "Servitor, I wish the chilled peach wine tonight."

The machine gave a high pitched whistle. "Deepest apologies, Lord Sethbert, but we have no chilled peach wine."

THEY SAT AND SETHBERT CLAPPED THREE
FROM BEHIND A HANGING TAPESTRY A METAL
CARAFE OF WINE THIS ONE
BOX LIKE AND HIS COLORING MORE COPPER

Sethbert grinned, then raised his voice in false anger. "What! No peach wine? That is inexcusable, servitor."

More whistling and a series of clicks. A gout of steam shot out of the exhaust grate. "Deepest apologies, Lord Sethbert—"

Sethbert clapped again. "Your answer is unacceptable. You will find me chilled peach wine even if you must walk all the way to Sadrvl and back with it. Do you understand?"

Rudolfo watched. The Lady Jin Li Tam did not. She fidgeted and worked hard to hide the embarrassment in the redness of her cheeks, the spark of anger in her eyes.

The servitor set down the tray and carafe. "Yes, Lord Sethbert." It moved towards the tent flap.

Sethbert chuckled and nudged the lady with his elbow. "You could take lessons there," he said. She offered a weak smile as false as his earlier anger.

Then Sethbert clapped and whistled. "Servitor, I've changed my mind. The cherry wine will suffice."

The metal man poured the wine and left for the kitchen tent to check on the first course.

"What a fabulous device," Rudolfo said.

Sethbert beamed. "Splendid, isn't it?

"However did you come by it?"

"It was... a gift," Sethbert said. "From the Androfrancines."

The look on Jin Li Tam's face said otherwise.

"I thought they were highly guarded regarding their magicks and machines?" Rudolfo said, raising his glass.

Sethbert raised his own. "Perhaps they are," he said, "with *some*."

Rudolfo ignored the subtle insult. The metal man returned with a tray of soup bowls full of steaming crab stew. He positioned the bowls in front of each of them. Rudolfo watched the careful precision. "Truly fabulous," he said.

"And you can get them to do most anything... if you know how," Sethbert said.

"Really?"

The Overseer clapped. "Servitor, run scroll seven three five."

Something clicked and clanked. Suddenly, the metal man spread his arms and broke into song, his feet moving lightly in a bawdy dance step while he sang. "My father and my mother were both Androfrancine brothers or so my Aunty Abbot likes to say...." The song went from raunchy to worse. When it finished, the metal man bowed deeply.

The Lady Jin Li Tam blushed. "Given the circumstances of our meeting," she said, "I think that was in poor taste."

Sethbert shot her a withering glare, then smiled at Rudolfo. "Forgive my consort. She lacks any appreciation for humor."

Rudolfo watched her hands white-knuckling a napkin, his brain suddenly playing out potentials that were coming together. "It does seem odd that the Androfrancines would teach their servitors a song of such... color."

She looked up at him. Her eyes held a plea for rescue. Her mouth drew tight.

"Oh, they didn't teach it that song. I did. Well, my man did."

"Your man can create scripts for this magnificent metal man?"

Sethbert spooned stew into his mouth, spilling it onto his shirt. He spoke with his mouth full. "Certainly. We've torn this toy of mine apart a dozen times over. We know it inside and out."

Rudolfo took a bite of his own stew, nearly gagging on the strong sea flavor that flooded his mouth, and pushed the bowl aside. "Perhaps," he said, "you'll loan your man to me for a bit."

Sethbert's eyes narrowed. "Whatever for, Rudolfo?"

Rudolfo drained his wine glass, trying to rid his mouth of the briny taste. "Well, I seem to have inherited a metal man of my own. I should like to teach him new tricks."

Sethbert's face paled slightly, then went red. "Really? A metal man of your own?"

"Absolutely. The sole survivor of Windwir, I'm told." Rudolfo clapped his hands and leaped to his feet. "But enough talk of toys. There is a beautiful woman here in need of a dance. And Rudolfo shall offer her such if you'll be so kind as to have your metal man sing something more apropos."

She stood despite Sethbert's glare. "In the interest of state relations," she said, "I would be honored."

They swirled and leaped around the tent as the metal man sang an upbeat number, banging on his metal chest like a drum. Rudolfo's eyes carefully traveled his partner, stealing glances where

he could. She had a slim neck and slim ankles. Her breasts sloped up rather than down, pushing against her silk robe, jiggling just ever so slightly as she moved with practiced grace and utter confidence. She was living art and he knew he must have her.

As the song drew to a close, Rudolfo seized her wrist and tapped a quick message into it. *A sunrise such as you belongs in the East with me; and I would never call you consort.*

She blushed, cast down her eyes, and tapped back a response that did not surprise him at all. *Sethbert destroyed the Androfrancines, he means you harm as well.*

He nodded, smiled a tight smile, and released her. "Thank you, Lady."

Sethbert looked at Rudolfo differently but Rudolfo made a point from that moment forward of looking at the Overseer's Lady. Dinner passed with excruciating slowness while banter fell like a city-dweller's footfall on the hunt. Rudolfo noticed that at no point did Sethbert bring up the destruction of Windwir or the metal man his Gypsy Scouts had found.

Sethbert's lack of words spoke loudest of all.

Rudolfo wondered if his own did the same.

RUDOLFO SLEPT FOR TWO HOURS IN THE BACK OF A supply wagon, dreaming of the red-headed Lady, before Third Alarm woke him. He leaped from the pile of empty sacks, drawing his sword and dropping lightly to the ground.

He raced past mustering soldiers and stopped at his own tent. He'd long ago learned the value of not using his own bed or tent in the field. Gregoric stood waiting.

"Well?" Rudolfo asked.

Gregoric grinned. "You were correct, Lord Entrolusian scouts. Magicked."

"Did they see what they came to see?"

Gregoric nodded. "And left quickly when I called the alarm."

"Very good. That will give them cause to scamper quickly home. And our own scouts?"

"Also magicked and right behind them."

Magicked scouts were nearly impossible to spot when you did not expect them. But Rudolfo *had* expected them. They had come. They had seen Isaak. They had left. And five of his best and bravest Gypsy Scouts had followed after.

"Very well. I will want to hear their report personally."

"Yes, Lord."

Rudolfo turned and entered the tent. The metal man's eyes glowed softly in the dark. "Isaak, are you well?"

The metal man whirred to life. The eyes blinked rapidly. "Yes, Lord."

Rudolfo walked over to him and squatted down. "I do not believe you are responsible for the devastation of Windwir."

"You indicated that may be the case. I only know what I remember."

Rudolfo thought about this for a moment. "What you *don't* remember is possibly more relevant. The missing time between seeking Brother Charles and finding yourself in the streets uttering Xhum Y'zir's spell." He looked at his sword, watched the light from Isaak's eyes play out on its burnished surface. "I do not think it was a malfunction. Sethbert—the Overseer of the Entrolusian City States—has a man who knows how to write those metal scrolls. He even has a metal man of his own."

"I do not understand. The Androfrancines and their Gray Guard are so careful—"

"Guards can be purchased. Gates can be slipped. Keys can be stolen." Rudolfo patted the metal man's knee. "You are quite a wondrous spectacle, my friend, but I suspect you understand little the capacity we humans have for good or ill."

"I've read about it," the metal man said with a sigh. "But you're right, I do not understand it."

"I hope you never do," Rudolfo said. "But on to other things. I have questions for you."

"I will answer truthfully, Lord."

Rudolfo nodded. "Good. How were you damaged?"

Isaak's metal eyelids flashed surprise. "Why, your men attacked me, Lord. I thought you knew this."

"My men found you in a crater and brought you to me straightaway."

"No, the first ones."

Rudolfo stroked his beard. "Tell me more."

"The fire had fallen, the lightning had blasted, and I returned to the library seeking Brother Charles or someone who could terminate me for my crimes. Nothing remained but ash and charred stone. I began calling for help and your men came for me with nets and chains. I sought to evade and they attacked me. I fell into the crater. Then the other men came and brought me to you."

Rudolfo offered a grim smile. "I wondered. Now I know more. By morning, I will know all."

Isaak looked up. "Lord, you did me remind you to return to your question about the removal of my work related memories."

"Ah, that." Rudolfo stood. "Perhaps it will come to nothing. Perhaps tomorrow, we will go down an altogether different path." He extended his hand to the metal man, who took it. The metal fingers were cool to his touch. "But if the winds of fate allow it, I would have work for you in my forest manor, Isaak."

"Work, Lord?"

Rudolfo smiled. "Yes. The greatest treasure in the world lies between your metal ears. I would have you write it all down for me."

Isaak released his hand. His eyes went hot and steam shot out from him. "I will not, Lord. I will not be anyone's weapon again."

For a brief moment, Rudolfo tasted fear in his mouth. A *metallic* taste. "No, no, no." He reached out, took up the hand again. "Never that, Isaak. But the other bits. The poetry, the plays, the histories, the philosophies, the mythologies, the maps. Everything the Androfrancine library protected and preserved... at least what bits you know. I would not have these pass from our world because of a buffoon's ambition."

"That is a monumental task, Lord, for a single servitor."

"I believe," Rudolfo said, "that you *may* have some help."

THE MAGICKED GYPSY SCOUTS RETURNED FROM THE Entrolusian camp before dawn. They carried a bound, gagged, hooded man between them, deposited him in a chair and removed his hood. Another scout put a large leather pouch on the table.

Servers laid breakfast to the table—oranges, pomegranates, cakes made with nuts and honey, berries with liquored syrup—while Rudolfo studied their guest. He was a smallish man with delicate fingers and a broad face. His eyes bulged and veins stood out on his neck and forehead.

Isaak stared. Rudolfo patted his arm. "He looks familiar to you?"

The metal man clicked. "He does, lord. He was Brother Charles' apprentice."

Rudolfo nodded. He sat at the head of the table and nibbled at a cake, washing it down with chilled peach wine.

The Gypsy Scouts gave their report; it was brief.

"So how many do they have?"

"Thirteen in total, lord," the chief scout answered. "They are in a tent near the center of his camp. We found him sleeping among them."

"Thirteen," Rudolfo said, stroking his beard. "How many mechoservitors did the Androfrancines have, Isaak?"

"That is all of them, lord."

Rudolfo pondered for a moment why they'd been spared in Y'zir's spell but the realization struck him quickly. The ancient desert mage would have known nothing of such scientific wonders. If they'd stayed out of the way, huddled in their stalls beneath the library.

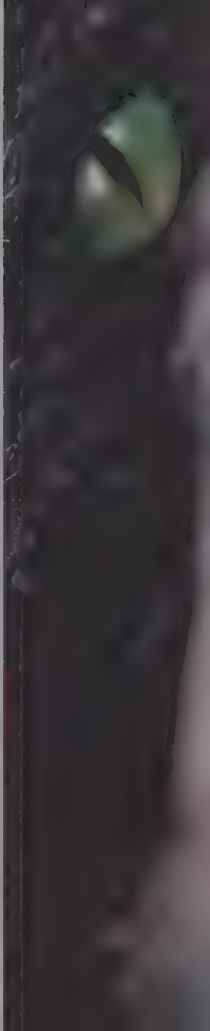
He waved to the nearest Scout. "Remove his gag."

Continued on page 90

The Cold Drake

WHAT WE ARE IS DETERMINED BY WHAT WE DO, NOT BY WHERE WE COME FROM.

BY RENEE BENNETT ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN HORTON



MY FATHER WAS A COLD-DRAKE. REVENGE AND MALICE FLOWED THROUGH HIM as blood through a lesser being. He stole the only daughter of a high mage from her walk along the cliffs of Hightower and sprouted his seed within her womb, then tore the babe—me—from her dying body. He named me Kamorr, which means 'the cold death' in the speech of the cold drakes, then cast me into the sea to live or die.

I lived. I was half cold-drake, and my body shaped itself to the waves, my teeth to the fish I caught there. I grew strong.

My father watched and smiled.

I wandered too far south one year and a fisherman caught me in his nets, bound me tight in cord and fishing weights, then drew me out of the water into air. I do not recall it well, save for light and heat and pain, but the fisherman told me later that I was a serpent who cried in a voice like a seagull's and wept. I had dried by then, and like a cold drake, my skin had cracked into seven pieces, releasing the form within. But unlike a drake, my inner form was human.

"Put her skin in this box," said the apprentice, and they did, unwrapping the net to remove each piece while I blinked at them, newborn to land. As they lifted the last piece away, some part of my sea-grown mind understood what they took, and I reached for it. For my trouble I gained a single scale before they locked my old life away from me. Pressed to my finger, it bonded to my nail, pearly-white and silver, as sharp as whetted steel.

The apprentice, seeing that, gave me a glove of white doe's hide and spelled it so that I could not take it off. Then he wrapped me in one of my own dead mother's gowns and stepped back to look at me.

I do not know what he saw, but I can imagine. My shape was slim and sleekly curved, like a drake, not like the human woman my mother had been. The gown, moth eaten and forgotten so long in her chests, hung on me as a rag.

He sighed and looked toward the fisherman. "She needs a woman's touch," he said.

"I'll get my wife," said the fisherman. He left to fetch her.

I may not remember how I looked, or how he looked, or what chairs stood in the room or what pots bubbled on the hearth, but I remember the words. Remembering words is part of what a cold drake is.

The fisherman's wife came and took up the care of me. I could repeat everything she said, save that much of it was the same as what she said to every young thing, whether it was chick or child. The one thing she said that mattered was, "She needs a name."

The apprentice looked at the fisherman and the fisherman looked at his wife, and she said, "Men!"

Then she looked at me and said, "You shall be Jinan, which means 'silver' in the old language." And I was silver, silver-haired and silver-eyed, my skin as pale as the doeskin glove upon my right hand.

She took me to her own home, her husband and the apprentice trailing her like tails. There, she took away my mother's gown and gave me a blanket instead. She set a bowl of soup in my lap, held my hands while she taught me what a spoon was for, and sent her husband and the apprentice out to fetch her marketing. "If you're going to stand and gape," she snapped to their protest, "You will be useful!"

There I stayed, as she remade my mother's gown to fit me, then taught me the craft of stitching, helping me remake another. Spring rolled into summer and then to fall. She taught me spoons and bowls, cups and kettles, needles, thread, and fabric. She taught me please and thank you and the names of every household thing and every man, woman and child in the village. Her name was Marta.

She did not teach me the prickly feeling of eyes that followed me everywhere. That was a feeling I had always known, but my sea shape had never paused for it, concerned as it was with weather and currents and the flight of fish. Now, though, it was a shiver along the soft, pale skin of my hands and face, an itch between my shoulders.

It wasn't the stares of the villagers, the touch of their attention evaporated as soon as they turned away. More, it smelled like the doeskin glove. It smelled of magic.

Marta clicked her tongue and frowned when I told her this, then essayed to divert my attention from it, since neither she nor I could do anything about it. She taught me the name of the Hightower mage, Taracas, and his apprentice, Pir. Pir, when told of my itch, could do nothing either. It made him frown.

Pir taught me the name of the cold drake—Vambar. I did not recognize it, my father had not named himself before throwing me to the sea. In any event, Vambar was a human word and a human name, not a sound a drake would answer to.

"It was a great tragedy when your mother was lost," Marta said, bustling around her hearth on the first day of autumn. She was making bread and I was making Pir a winter gift. "Your lord grandfather pined for days, drawing bowls of water from the well and staring into them until he went blind. Pir drew the water then, and when he failed to find your lady mother, he took your grandfather to the city of mages in the south for healing."

I paused in my needlework, a leap of dolphins riding a wave around the hem of a blue shirt. "But Pir is here," I said.

"He came back," she replied, and she turned to smile at me before going on about the business of breadmaking. "He came back to find you, and here you are."

"Not me," I said, because precision is a passion of cold drakes, as much as words. "My mother." I used my nail to slice a white thread, then slipped gray into my needle and continued my work.

"You are as much of her as can be found," she said, and there was so much truth in that, I had to put my needle down to think about it.

Pir came in then, ducking through the door, halting with his mouth open when he saw me. He did that a lot. "Your glove!"

I picked up the glove from among the threads in my sewing basket. "It is here," I said, and watched him look toward Marta.

Marta snorted at him and punched her bread. "She heard your spell, lad. She hears you lock and unlock the sheep gates. Do you think she forgets?"

He closed his mouth. He did that a lot, too, whenever Marta answered his questions. He looked back to me and said, "I did it to save you trouble."

The glove, he meant. Pir was good at not saying what he was talking about.

I had gotten good at knowing what it was he really said. "And yourself trouble, and Marta, and everyone else." My gaze met his. "It is very sharp."

His gaze dropped and his face flamed. Marta laughed and said, "I think that isn't the only part of you that might draw blood, Jinan."

"I have only the one scale," I said.

She only laughed again, and started making rolls.

Pir coughed. "It is the first day of fall," he said. "Come to fair and have your fortune told."

Marta startled and frowned at him, and Pir ignored her, looking at me. I said, "I thought one's fortune was for one to discover, not for someone else's telling."

"If you, of all people, follow someone else's telling of your fate, I will despair for us all." He smiled and held out a hand. "Come to fair."

My turn to frown at him. "You are confusing, Pir," I said, but I set the shirt aside and put my glove on before taking his hand. I heard Marta tutting at us as we left.

The fair was a busy thing, with odd noises and strange smells, and unlikely colored tents set up on the commons below the tower. There were sellers of cattle and carpets, baskets and birds, a juggler, a drummer, a trio of sweet-voiced singers who told bawdy jokes with their eyes demurely downcast. The fortune teller's tent sat at one edge of the noise, at the base of the steps to the tower. It was hung with bunches of ribbons in all colors, like the bunches of herbs hanging in Marta's kitchen. The teller himself sat bundled in robes and wraps under the front awning, a strip of lurid pink silk bound about his eyes.

I looked at Pir, but he only smiled and waved me into line behind the weaver's daughter.

The daughter was stammering out a greeting to the fortune teller. She had a scarf she'd woven with her own hands into his hands, and stuttered to a halt as he smiled.

"You are young," he said, "and comely." Which made her blush, because she was, but he was blindfolded. I raised my head, scenting a tingle in the air, like when Pir had spelled my glove, like when I myself had unspelled it.

"Your hand, girl," he said, and she stepped forward and laid her twitching fingers in his.

He rubbed a thumb across her knuckles and she jerked as if to pull away, but he held her fast as his other hand reached up to the bundles of ribbons above his head, whispering words as he did. Magic rippled outward, sent a shiver up my arms. He tugged three ribbons free as it ebbed and he let go of her hand, and then he braided the ribbons together.

She gave a little yip of joy. He had chosen a red like the apples in her own cheeks, an amber like the cider-colored hair along her shoulders. And finally, a smoky gray that exactly matched the eyes of Tan Bargas, the innkeep's son, though he had not spoken for her yet.

I looked at Pir, who was grinning at the fortune teller. Then he smiled at me and ushered me forward.

I had no scarf, nor anything of my own working to lay in the fortune teller's hand. So I laid the doeskin glove in it instead.

Pir hissed through his teeth. The fortune teller paused, the smile forgotten on his face. "You are young," he said. "And the sea holds your name."

I laid my hare hand on his offered palm. "My name is ..."

He lifted his other hand. "No names," he said, and then he was plucking ribbons from overhead.

The first was gray-green black, the exact color of a storm at sea. The second was a pearly gold like a topaz seen through water on a windswept morning. And the third was white, pure white, like the blaze of the sun at midday, or the doeskin glove.

Topaz had been the color of my mother's dress, the first gown that I had ever worn. "I know your name," I said.

"That was your mother's gift," said my grandfather, braiding the ribbons together, blindfolded face turned toward my voice. "She knew a thing, no matter what shape it wore."

She would have known Vambar, I thought. She would have known what thing he wrought in her. Aloud, I said, "He's been watching me."

Pir froze beside me, and Taracas froze too, on his rug. To my left, I heard a laugh as of rocks rolling together, and the sound of the first scream.

He came in his first form, that of a great worm of the deep, fanged head lifting like a tower above the fairgoers, as Hightower lifted above the town. He snapped at the screaming people, took a whole cow and ate it in two gulps before swinging his gnirning head toward us.

Beside me, Pir quivered, but he stayed. Taracas sat up straighter on his rug, his hands resting on his knees. My half-finished braid of ribbons lay forgotten in his lap.

I looked up at my father and said, "Vambar."

A muttering growl vibrated in the air. "So men call me." The shiver of his attention swept over me as a wave. I closed my eyes and felt it stream around me, past me, like the press of a current, knew in that moment that one could swim in a cold drake's gaze as a fish could swim the sea. I opened my eyes and found Pir had stumbled beside me, that Taracas was huddled over on his side, away from Vambar's stare, his bunches of ribbons tumbled about his blind body.

"Vambar," I said. The name meant cruel in the old language, the same tongue that gave me my human name. I felt his attention come back to me and I raised a hand, felt the wave part around my fingers, trailing a froth of eddying thought. The drake scale on my finger sliced through the stream, the edges as clean as frozen water. "Once upon a time you revenged yourself on a man through his daughter. Why?"

His voice growled. "He was a learned man who would not teach. She was a sweet face with no heart behind it. They betrayed their promises of learning and companionship to me."

My mother had the gift of knowing true things. So did I. "You broke your promise to listen. You broke your promise to love."

His head lowered to level with mine, his eye a blazing moon, close enough to touch. His breath hissed out, cold and damp, with the salt of the sea in it. "You were not there."

I did reach for him, touched the scaled hide behind the flaring nostril. "She told me before my birth," I said, and I drove the finger with the drake scale deep into his flesh.

He screamed and swept his head sideways, knocked me into the supports of Taracas' booth, bringing it down on top of me. I heard Pir shouting at him and heard his answering roar, pushed tent cloth aside and saw Vambar swoop as he had swooped at the cow—but this time, it was Pir's feet kicking as Vambar bit down.

"No," I said. It felt like a great wave within my heart had spoke the word. The wave spoke again as I reached, whispering the words that brought ribbons to my bloodied fist.

Black, like hate. Black, like rage. And black, like the absence of love.

Pir was gone. I drove my nail into my own flesh this time.

The change was too fast for pain, gathering the wild surf within me to reshape everything I was. I could be fish or fowl or cold drake, as I chose. I felt like frost branching across still water, like the thrust of ice as it is released from below. I breached the surface of my own self to find my name—my cold drake name—shimmering in the white glare of magic. White knots of power, linked by silvery threads, marked each living mind in the village. I knew their names, knew their strengths, knew that if I plucked the chords that bound them together the sound could turn the stones of Hightower to dust.

I chose human shape, though I felt more whirlpool than woman. The ribbons in my hand gleamed like malice.

Vambar was a knot of blackness fringed in black, the exact color of the deepest part of the sea. He growled a laugh. "Fight me, daughter," he said, and he lunged at me.

He was huge, and old, and powerful—more powerful than I. I would need every life in the village to oppose him, to even stand against him, but as I gathered the threads of them together, I knew—this would kill them all. So I stepped aside, and as he passed, I threw the ribbons at him and spoke the spell of binding, the same as on my glove.

He roared and fought, but the binding was true, because it was his own fate. One end led to Hightower, which had held what he hated. One led to me, the result of his rage. The third led into the sea, where the bones of my mother lay beneath shifting sand.

"Kamorr," he said, moon-shaped eyes looming over me. "I demand you release me."

A true name cannot be bestowed. It can only be accepted. "My name is Jinan," I said.

It took a long time for his skin to dry. He raged at me as the sun arced overhead, as I thought of Pir, bravely facing him. When the first piece broke away, I looked inside, hoping to find Pir waiting there, mouth open in surprise. But there was only more drake hide beneath.

He shed seven times. It took all day and all night. Sometimes he was a drake, and sometimes a man, and sometimes he was some other creature. When the sun rose again the final piece fell. He had passed threats by then, passed anger, passed denial and pleading and sulleness into silence. The ground was littered with dead fish and dying crabs.

He was hollow inside, save for the mangled cow and Pir.

We buried my father at sea. His seven times seven pieces became sharks that swam off to their own concerns. Pir we buried beneath the walls of Hightower, facing the sea and the morning sun. I laid his winter gift in his grave with him, and it felt like we buried my heart there, too.

My grandfather returned south to the city of the mages, and I sat in the tower through the storms of winter, staring out across the water each day, looking for the word that described what I felt. When the water refused to give it up, I taught myself to read my grandfather's books, poring through pages and scrolls without finding it anywhere. Marta came and went, telling me stories of fishermen and fishermen's wives and the children they shared between them, but she left each night, and her words left with her.

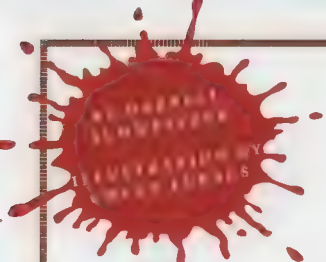
On the first day of spring, she brought the unfinished braid of my fortune and left it on the sill of the seaward window. A storm was blowing, after she left, the latch broke and the window swung free, catching the ribbons and dragging them out to flutter in the raging wind. I snatched for them and missed, and they sailed out across the rocky slope and over the edge to the water, out of my sight. So, for the first time since autumn, I left Hightower.

There was a boat, with a man chest-deep in the water before it, a rope over his shoulder as he hauled the boat to shore. My grandfather sat in the boat, smiling under the pink silk blindfold. He waved to me as the boatman ducked through a wave to come up sopping the other side and wearing my ribbons like seaweed on his face.

My grandfather shouted, "Jinan!"

The boatman had dragged the ribbons off himself to frown at them. At my grandfather's shout, he looked up. His mouth dropped open when he saw me; his eyes were the exact color of topazes seen through water. He whispered, "Jinan."

Another, stronger wave doused him and my ribbons, as effective as a fishwife's words. I smiled and walked into the water to help my grandfather's newest apprentice bring my grandfather—and my unfinished fate—home to Hightower.



The Hero Spoke

WHEN THE LINE BETWEEN LOVE AND HATE, TRUTH AND LIES, DEVOTION AND MADNESS BECOMES TOO THIN, WE MAY FIND OURSELVES IN AN UNKNOWN COUNTRY.

We regret our lies most of all.

—The Book of Mirrors

So he spoke, opening up the hoard of his words. They flowed forth, like spilled gold

"Lies," he said. "All lies."

He was a young man. I could tell, under the grime and the scars. When he took off his helmet and placed it in his lap, I saw a smooth face, barely able to sustain a beard.

Weeping, he denied everything.

"None of it is true," he said. "I am not the one you think I am. I didn't do the things I myself have claimed to have done. This helmet is not mine. It belongs to another, who will surely come to claim it and his vengeance."

The helmet was of tarnished bronze, with a T-shaped split for the eyes and nose, a huge black, horsehair crest on top. Indeed, the helmet of a champion. It gleamed dully in the firelight.

We two sat in the dark, beneath the brilliant stars, at a crossroads.

"Tell the story then, as a story, as a lie."

He wept, and spoke.

"It's not true," he said, "that I journeyed in the company of a genuine hero, whose name is immortal, though I am unworthy to repeat it. Call him my Master, then."

"Hypothetically," I said, "part of the lie."

"Yes."

"We sat around a campfire, much like this one. Imagine that much. In the dark and cold. The great man hunched by the fire, while I tended to what needed to be tended to. And his words, like thunder in my mind. *Of course you will sing my praises, boy,* he said. He spoke without any boastfulness, merely stating a fact as obvious as the weather. Of course I would sing his praises, though he shouldn't have called me a boy. Anyone who has spent

five summers fighting alongside one such as he has the right to be called a man, but heroes have no time for such details It is the way of things

"So we paused to rest beneath the strange, faint stars—not the stars of Earth at all, but those stars which rise out of the mist as you descend the final slope toward the river, on the border of the Land of the Dead Wizards have names for those stars I do not

"We had come through the country of the centaurs. We had battled dragons, men, and winged demons. We had cut down countless foes, trampling thousands into the mud and dust. Now, here, on the last night, beneath those stars, high up the bank above the Dark River, he seemed to recede into his helmet and his armor, to become all the less a man, more a purely heroic force, the crest of his helmet giving him the appearance of a fierce and predatory bird, an avenger of the gods It was the supreme honor of my life to be with him that night, as he recounted the story thus far, numbering our deeds that they might be more easily remembered.

"I was to be the *first* to remember them, the *first* to put them into the form of telling, into words which would be improved upon by others Let me begin the process that would continue on even as I myself would be forgotten, like a vast river flowing from an unknown source

"We sharpened our weapons, and then we slept Before I faded away completely I tried to compose a few heroic lines, but the music did not come to me Never mind I, like my Master, was beyond all such things now Let others, who did not witness, refine the telling

"After a time, we awoke, in the dark, for the sun did not rise here. Beneath those scant stars, we made our way down the bank

"I heard water flowing gently nearby. The River Our goal Did I truly hear it, or dream it? Were we transported in our dreams at the very end, or did we rise up and walk the final distance?

"There, at the very lip of the waters, we slew our horses, in final sacrifice, as was required of us, and we poured out the blood on the barren earth, and we saw, clearly before us, as if a curtain had parted, the great River of the Dead and the Land of the Dead beyond it. We walked along that penultimate shore, pouring out libations of blood from our cupped hands, and it seemed that the spirits rose up around us like cold mist, whispering in our ears, pleas, curses, sometimes just names

"We accosted the Ferryman, where his boat was tied up at a little dock. We held out our hands and let him lick the blood off them like a dog This was sufficient payment for our passage, though I could tell from his hungry eyes, from the way his shrunken face swayed lustfully, that he greatly desired the living blood within our veins.

"But he would not have that My Master drew his sword as if to whack the vile creature's head clean off He pointed to the boat and to the further shore, and the Ferryman laughed, like the wind wheezing through rattling bones

"So we set forth, until the nearer shore was lost behind us in darkness and the hills on the far side loomed huge and black, blotting out even those few stars of the Deathlands No one spoke The Ferryman strained at his oar

"I heard the angry voice of a rival I had once slain in a duel, buzzing in my ear like an insect, then fading away to a remembrance, then gone

"On the further shore, as we disembarked, the Ferryman grovelled before us, both pleading and demanding at the same time, as we had known he would At a signal from my Master, I drew my sword and he has, and we struck off the Ferryman's head and broke his bones, and ground him into the dust of the Deathlands, lest he raise the alarm at our coming

"Then we pressed on, against the black wind, against the impenetrable night which would have devoured us. We leaned into our shields, while the Deathlands, alarm or no, threw up against us every terror, every danger and pain and dread we had ever known. All our slain foes fought us once again, and yet my great and perfect Master did not waver, and when once I stumbled, he bore me up.

"I *worshipped* him then. He, truly, more than any other, deserved to be celebrated in epic and song, my own humble efforts at first, then those of the great bards to come after.

"Yet I cannot speak his name "

The teller stopped telling the tale, holding his tear-streaked face in his hands, perhaps to add verisimilitude to an otherwise unconvincing pack of lies, for heroes do not weep, but liars often do.

Idly, I picked up his helmet out of his lap to examine it. I even made to try it on.

But he screamed, and snatched it back, leaping to his feet and drawing his battered sword I myself did not rise I saw only madness in his eyes, gleaming there in the firelight I think he would have cut my head off in another second, but I bade him, in a soothing voice, to sit down again and continue telling lies, and I promised not to believe a word of it.

"It's all a muddle," he said. "It makes no sense. How then was I ever supposed to tell the story, and *why* did my Master command me to rehearse the tale of our deeds? *Why* did I struggle toward the composition of heroic lines, if I was never supposed to return from the mission, if he *intended to betray me*? Heroes do not commit treachery It is impossible I can't go on—"

"I believe you can," I said, "though I believe nothing else "

"This, then, is untrue:

"We came at last to that great palace of bone, which rises like a mountain into the black sky, where dwells the King of Death with all his secret treasures We stood before the massive gates whereon are carved a record of all the sins and folly of mankind. The lights in the windows far above us glowed a pale green, like baleful eyes, when we pounded on that gate with the pommels of our swords

"All, thus far, according to plan

"But the gate would not open, and I stood there, looking at my Master, and he at me, and I thought, for the very first time, that my Master was at a loss as to what to do, that he had no further stratagem

"He put his hand gently on my shoulder, and rehearsed again, in synoptic form yet more eloquently than I ever could—words made golden by the mere fact that *he*, the inestimable Hero, was speaking thus—the tale of our deeds, praising as he did my own role in the consummation of things, the unravellings of Fate or the doom of the gods or whatever one should call it

"'That is for a poet to decide,' he said

"'Shall not I, then?

"He shook his head sadly 'I'm afraid not.'

"He explained to me, solemnly, but with deliberation, that it was, alas, the inherent nature of our mission that only *one* of us was to return from it, either the Hero was to accomplish the thing or the Companion who would witness it; but not both, because someone's blood, *living blood*, must be shed before these gates if ever they were to open, so that *someone* might storm the very citadel of King Death and learn his secrets, to demand an explanation and remedy for the world's pain, for the benefit of mankind.

"'It's very important,' he said

"'What about the song of your praise, which I am supposed to compose?' I asked

"'Merely a ruse,' he said, to get you to come along. I'll try to remember some of it. I regret this. It is truly regrettable.'

"I can't—" The teller broke off his narration once again. He wept like a child who has been beaten, just then, though he had the form of a man, and, wearing his crested helmet now, had assumed the aspect of an avenger of the gods

"Say on—"

Continued on page 85

GENCON

WHATEVER IT TAKES!

How committed are you to getting to Gen Con Indy? Let's take a quiz. Do you call yourself a serious gamer? Do the words "the best four days in gaming" make you giddy? Would others call your love of RPGs, TCGs, minis, or other games an obsession? If you missed 1000's of events and tournaments, plus hundreds of exhibitors, would you feel ill?

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JOHN PICACIO
TAKES INSPIRATION FROM A
CAREER IN ARCHITECTURE.

BY KAREN HABER

A wraparound cover illustration [illegible]
The Empire of Ice Cream

ABOVE: Cover illustration for *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant & Other Stories* by Jeffrey Ford.
BELOW: Cover art for *Things that Never Were*.

THE SPHINX PEERS OVER ITS SHOULDER AT THE viewer, an unreadable expression—Curious? Amused?—on his/her face. Its hair rises up in bright buoyant waves, becoming part of the skyscape above. Its wings might just be part of the clouds or embossed parchment. Is it perched on a clifftop, waiting to take flight, or has it just landed? Nothing is certain, but many things are suggested, which is just the way John Picacio, the artist who created this cover illustration for *Things That Never Were* by Matthew Rossi (Monkeybrain Books) likes it.

Picacio isn't an art fascist. The last thing he wants to do is dictate how you should look at his work or, even more important, how you should imagine an image from a story. He does, however, hope you'll accept his invitation to join him in the aesthetic dance, and perhaps even execute an arabesque or two in your own imagination. When it comes to art, he's happy to make it a *pas de deux* with the viewer.

"I want to allow people to plug in," says the award-winning artist. "It's not only about what I'm trying to say, it's not only about what's coming out of my head, hands, mouth. It's how it connects with the audience. If you're not thinking about how best to pull them into the process, you're not in the game."

Picacio enjoys playing a looser artful game in which what is not suggested is as important as what is. "I see too much illustration in our field that is ultra-representational and not as respectful to the audience as it could be. I think we sometimes get bagged for things that are too overt and heavy-handed, and probably deservedly so. I'd rather give the readers a healthier amount of respect and allow them to make their own connections."

What that translates into is a painterly approach that often poses questions of context and meaning which the viewer is free to answer.

Picacio enjoys the way unusual associations can spark people's creative reactions.

"I'm a big fan of collage, of layered imagery and how it sparks the imagination. The whole world becomes your palette."

He cites collagists Joseph Cornell, Robert Rauschenberg, and Dave McKean as big influences. Some of his work, seen in his big new retrospective, *Cover Story: The Art of John Picacio* (Monkeybrain Books, 2006) displays a distinct enthusiasm for 3-D assemblages.

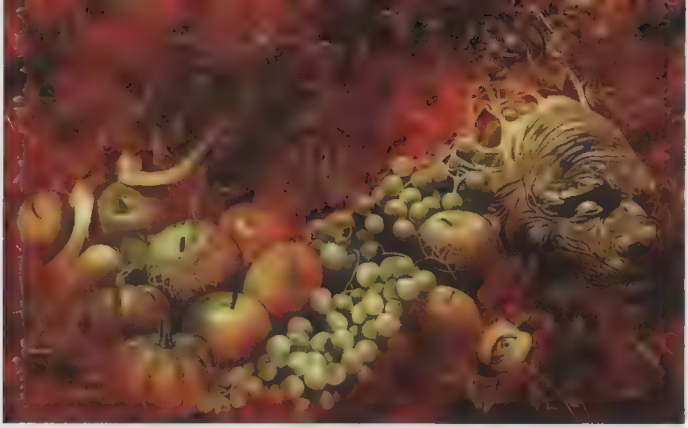
Picacio's work also shows a hint of the years he spent with comics, first as a reader and then as a creator of comic books. He produced his own comic, *Words & Pictures*, with Fernando Ramirez in 1994. He credits those books with beginning his career as an illustrator in fantasy and science fiction.

ABOVE: This image first appeared in *Realms of Fantasy* magazine as a feature illustration for *Viola*, by Leigh Kennedy, Dec 2002.

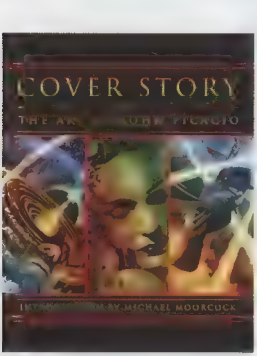
The covers of *Words & Pictures* got attention and someone suggested I consider doing book covers. Then I was lucky enough to receive the commission from Mojo Press for the cover of the 30th anniversary edition of Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man*. This Moorcock cover was the turning point.

I think you can see the comic book design influence in some of the work. You can see some framing that definitely comes from comics, the ability to show multiple pictures in the same image and not be afraid to let those things talk to each other. When words and pictures come together in the right way, their associative power is immense.

Although Picacio was fascinated by the comic book world, and attended the Comic Con in 1992 where he met comic greats such as Dave McKean, Kent Williams, George Pratt, and Jon J. Muth, he



ABOVE: Wraparound cover illustration for *Bumper Crop*, by Joe R. Lasdale, 2003. BELOW: The cover of Picacio's book, featuring many of his illustrations. OPPOSITE PAGE (ABOVE): Wraparound cover illustration for *The Cat's Pajamas & Other Stories*, by James Morrow, 2004. OPPOSITE PAGE (BELOW): Cover illustration for *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller Jr, 2005



went on to get a degree in architecture and practiced as an architect for five years before art won the fight for his heart and mind

"There are things you like and there are things you love. I liked architecture and I was really good at it, but I loved illustration, and I was always pursuing it, always looking at art and illustration and design in every moment of my spare time. It got to a point with the architectural world where I said, "I'm not happy." I did both for about 5 years and then I made the commitment, and quit architecture in 2001."

He admits architecture also left an undeniable legacy in his work. "Process and problem-solving in architecture school was very important. And I still like to see things in process, observe the truth of how something is built or unbuilt. I think the ability to encourage the audience to finish something in their own minds is crucial to the artistic process."

Part of what I most enjoy is leaving space for viewers to use their imagination. I like to leave something a little loose. I don't think there's enough of that in this field."

In the early years of the field, the covers of the pulp magazines were very representational and they've left an imprint on science fiction and fantasy. Unfortunately, it's led to a legacy of conservatism. The mentality to be visually conservative in science fiction illustration has been there almost as long as the field as has been around. It's a paradox. Our visual courage has been lacking. It's always been easier to go down the representational road, and I think the genre industry's willingness to embrace challenging illustration often doesn't equal our willingness to embrace challenging literature."

It's no surprise Picacio admires less representational artists including Rick Berry, Barron Storey, Richard Powers, and John Berkey.

Some of it comes from his love of paint handling. "Paint is my first love. I learned whatever I know about painting from absorbing it through the art of great artists like Schiele and Sargent, and lots and lots of practice with trial and error."

"I also love the Surrealists, their ability to manipulate associate meanings and images. Another huge influence has been Richard Powers. I don't think I could get away with doing what I do today without building on his shoulders, on his conceptual courage and determination to invite the audience in."

Picacio doesn't draw a line between high and low or try to create hierarchies of artists. He takes inspiration from any and all sources: great architecture, famous paintings, horror movies, even pulp magazines and advertising posters provide raw material for his imaginative process.

There was a book that I just loved when I was a kid. *Reel Art. Great Posters from the Golden Age of the Silver Screen*. I checked that out of the library a lot. As a kid I was blown away by that stuff, and even then, I was very aware of old 1930s and 1940s movie poster design, especially for those old Universal Studios horror films. That influence shows up in my work, occasionally.

In Picacio's view, a cover should always start with the words inside the book. As he tells Joseph McCabe in the interview section of *Cover Story*, he puts the writer's intent above all other considerations when he begins conceptualizing an illustration.

"The book is God. Whatever the book says is right, then that's what I'm trying to go for. I think in everything I've done, I've always treated the book as the final arbiter of whether I make a decision or not. Every decision I make comes from how I'm filtering that book through my head, and what I think the book is trying to say—what I think will make for a meaningful experience for the audience. Each book really is its own unique experience. So that's the thing that tells me what to do."

That doesn't mean Picacio wants to tell the viewer what to do with the story. "You don't want to steal the reader's right to imag-

ine. You're trying to complement their reading of the story rather than dictate."

One of the many strengths of Picacio's work is how often the viewer can return to it and see something new. *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant* contains a wealth of tantalizing visual prods for the viewer: the monstrous hand clutching the papers, the pages floating up and behind the figure that—almost—seem to be part of his hair or part of the clouds or the lapels of his shirt. The character looks familiar: a little bit like Albert Einstein crossed with Mark Twain, and he seems to be floating in the sky, or undersea. The background color fractures around him into mosaic-like pieces, boosting the subliminal sense of discontinuity.

This illustration is a departure from one of Picacio's favored palettes: acid yellow and green pushed hard against a dark background. He uses painterly textures to great effect, providing a sense of motion and dynamism through the swirling colors. The artist says that his unusual palette and color contrast combinations are the result of paint and surprises. "I like to combine different parts of paintings. You trust your eye to catch something—an opportunity, a surprise. That's where a lot of the fun comes from, the discovery of possibilities. And in a way it goes back to Joseph Cornell and collage with its notion of the "found object" and missing links."

Picacio's work has netted awards including the Chesley, the World Fantasy, and the International Horror Guild Award. In 2005 he was a Hugo finalist (he is again this year) and next year he'll be Artist Guest of Honor at World Horror Con in Toronto, where he and Traci Ogden plan to honeymoon after a March 2007 wedding. John credits Traci for unstinting support, and says that she is currently working on setting up the sale of prints of his artwork online. He does not, however, consult her or anyone else when a painting is in progress.

"I'm very private when working. I'd rather fall on my face on my own rather than get confused by input."

He begins by reading the manuscript. "I can't just blindly follow marching orders. The only way I can make myself happy and provide the maximum value is by reading the book and filtering it through my own sensibilities. I make pencil marks and little notes to myself as I read the work for the first time. Then I create a design brief, a two to four sentence statement encapsulating what I think the book is trying to do, and maybe a nugget of truth I can serve in the process."

"Deadlines vary so much. It's nice to have at least two months on an assignment, at the very minimum. Much of that is taken up by 'due diligence,' all the early thought work, reading, and research. The final piece is usually the accumulation of a lot of good, preparatory work starting with solid drawing and underpainting."

Picacio has illustrated covers for some of the biggest names in the fantasy and sci-fi fields. Among the works he's most proud of is a cover for *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller, Jr. (HarperCollins/EOS 2006). He's also excited that he was asked to illustrate the cover for Robert Heinlein's *Red Planet* (Del Rey, 2007), and that he received the nod to paint a "triptych," three covers for Simon & Schuster for a Star Trek trilogy by David R. George III to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the classic sf show. Upcoming projects include a wraparound cover for Pyr Books' *Fast Forward 1*, a cutting edge anthology edited by Lou Anders.

When he has time, Picacio says he'd like to return to comics someday. "I have some stories I'd like to tell." He also hopes to illustrate children's books. "Mostly, I'd like to be one of those people who takes the audience to places they haven't been yet."

Regardless of the vehicle, you can bet Picacio will be holding out a hand to the reader. "Allowing the audience to engage in the work is what makes for the most successful illustration. We've got to give people room to participate. When you see a good cover illustration do that, everyone benefits—the book, the author, the audience, the whole field." (For more information check out www.johnpicacio.com.)

By K.D. Wentworth • Illustration by Peter Ferguson

The explorations of adolescence can be dangerous, and some kids never come back from them, or come back damaged or changed. But the lucky ones come back with a precious gift.

TRUE NORTH

"Great things are done when men and mountains meet."
—William Blake

Summer arrived in Springfield, Missouri, with droning cicadas and heavy, grass-scented heat. Carly was fifteen, anxious and pale, all elbows, wondering what was wrong with her. Half of her friends had journeyed the summer before, and now, at every turn, the rest were heading north as though the decision to go were as easy as breathing.

Each time, it happened without warning. One day, the teenagers were still at home, like Jade and Anika, worrying over slights from their friends, talking humdrum summer jobs to earn spending money; the next, they had shipped away without a single word to explore the mysteries of the North Lands.

But even if the Call had come, Carly knew her parents would never allow her to go. All she had to do was exert a little self-control, they said. It was boorish, self-indulgent, and dangerous to run off like that, leaving your family to worry. After all, it was a well-known fact that not everyone who went came back. Look at the Donaldsons' Ben, gone forever without a trace. Why, her very own parents hadn't journeyed when the moment had come, and their lives were all the better for it. Surely, they said, she could see that.

Then, one day, on her way home from a job interview as the Missoun sun blazed down like a great blast furnace, the Call surfaced between one step and the next, a great thrumming behind her breastbone. She trembled like a struck chord, her body playing music for the first time in her life.

She hurried home, but her thoughts were filled with the roar of cool winds, high promontories where you could look down at the whole world, waterfall spray on your face, submerged rocks that gave shape to rushing rivers. It all added up to a song just waiting to be sung. Her feet longed to dance but she couldn't quite catch the rhythm.

They gazed at one another, both hot-eyed and intractable. Her mother finally turned away. "Go and lie down," she said. "We'll eat dinner soon and then you'll feel better."

Carly paced the confines of her bedroom, stuffed her school backpack with clothes, emptied it out in a fit of despondency, then packed again more carefully. Whenever she closed her eyes, she saw *swift rivers cascading over stones, snow-mantled mountains rising up against a brilliant blue sky.* The air here seemed stale beyond bearing. How had she stood breathing it all these years?

When her father came home, she heard her mother telling him what had passed between them that afternoon. His voice, calm at first, became ever more agitated until finally he rushed down the hall and flung open her bedroom door without even knocking.

The bulging backpack lay on the bed and he snatched it up. "You're not to leave this house for any reason!"

They both stared at the backpack. Her hands shook and she crossed her arms to steady herself. "You don't understand," she said in a strangled voice. "I have to go!"

"No, you don't," he said. "Someday, you'll understand that."

A number of miserable hours later, she heard her parents go to bed and tried her door. It was locked. Her bedroom was on the second floor but nevertheless she opened the window and leaned out into the heavy, sweet-scented summer air. She could hear frogs

But even if the Call had come, Carly knew her parents would never allow her to go. All she had to do was exert a little self-control, they said. It was boorish, self-indulgent, and dangerous to run off like that.

Her mother looked up as Carly burst through the front door. She was a small, dainty made woman with a single streak of gray at the temple. Her lips tightened as she took in Carly's flushed face. "I—see."

The living room was cool in contrast to the heat outside. The antique grandfather clock ticked insistently on the wall. Carly dropped onto the couch, hands knotted. *Leaves* shifted behind her eyes, a million different shades of green. Her friends had already gone, but she might be able to catch up.

With a disapproving shake, her mother laid aside the newspaper. "Go to your room."

"Yes, of course," Carly said. "I have to pack." She felt wild with anticipation. Out the window, she saw a pair of youths carrying backpacks, obviously already on their way. She wondered if she could get her things together fast enough to join them.

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" her mother said. "We've already discussed this. You're not going to that awful place."

Carly bolted to her feet. Her skin itched from the inside and she could not be still. "I have to go! It's not a matter of choice."

"I said the same," her mother said, "but my parents knew their duty just as I know mine." She took Carly's arm, then recoiled, staring at her hand. Her face paled. "If you go, then don't bother to come back, even if you do survive. No true daughter of ours would behave in such a way."

For a second, Carly almost gave in. She'd spent a lifetime being the good girl, trying to do as she was told. But then the Call surged, a vast aching wave of *need*, and it seemed she would die of it.

"It's a terrible place!" her mother said, desperation invading her tone. "Everyone knows that."

"No, they don't!" Carly rubbed her arm. "No one can describe what happens there."

"They don't want to!"

"But they do," Carly said. "When Heather came back she said it was wonderful, only words couldn't contain it. She said I'd just have to see for myself."

booming and the thin-edged whine of mosquitoes. The ache resurged, as though her heart were being torn out, so that it could go north while she was mired here.

How had her parents borne it? Had some essential part of them departed, leaving behind only shells to go about the boring daily business of living?

A dark shape stopped out on the sidewalk and stared up at her. Starlight reflected off a pair of glasses. "The Call is strong tonight," it said softly. "Are you coming?"

The voice sounded male, but she didn't recognize it.

"I can't," she said. "My parents locked me in."

"That is sad. It's not that far."

She put one leg over the window sill, then hesitated. "I don't have any money or my backpack. They took everything."

A second dark shape joined the first. "You mean you didn't make an emergency stash, like they teach you in school? That's lame." This voice was female.

"Tie some stuff up in a sheet and let's go," the first voice said. "That is, if you really want to come."

"I do!" she said, then retreated just long enough to throw a few clothes into her top sheet. She tied it up, then dropped the bundle out the window. The night seemed mysterious, but welcoming, as though the darkness was alive. She hung on the sill for a moment, feeling the separation, her old life behind her, the new ahead. She laughed as she dropped, and though the fall wrenched her ankle, she was smiling when the other two pulled her to her feet.

They walked to the bus station several miles away, then applied for stand-by status. The ticket clerk, grizzled and bleary-eyed, scowled at them. "Journeyers, I take it?" He crossed his arms. "It's late in the season. Most everyone has already gone. How do I know you lot didn't go last summer and are just angling for a free ride?"

Roy, her male companion, shook his head. He had a thin chicken neck, but, behind his glasses, his gray eyes were

clear and steady. "It's the law. Journeyers have the right to unsold seats."

The girl, Marta, edged Roy aside. She was a head taller than either Carly or Roy, sturdily built with a mop of untidy brown hair. "Give us the tickets," she said, "or I'll report you."

A smile cracked his sallow face. "Parents after you, are they? Maybe we're sold out on the next bus north. Maybe there won't be another until tomorrow."

"You're not sold out," Marta said. Her gaze was level, and Carly realized she outweighed the clerk.

She peered over Marta's shoulder. "Did you get?" she asked shyly. "What was it like?"

"I went," he said, sounding as though he were surprised to remember.

"Was it wonderful?" she persisted.

"Not all of it," he said. "We were hungry and cold, and one boy died. Stupid kids, you should turn around and go back home where you'll be safe."

"But what were the wonderful parts like?" Carly said. "What did you do up there in the mountains?"

His mouth gaped and for a second it seemed he would speak, then he shook his head. "Can't nobody tell you that. It's different for each person. You just have to see for yourself—and hope it don't kill you."

Marta held out her hand and finally he sighed, punched up the tickets and pushed them under the glass. "Stand-by only," he said. "Wait until the driver tells you to board. Paying passengers ride before Journeyers. That's the law, too."

They heard the soft whuff of a hydraulic door two buses down and had to run, then pound on the door until the driver opened it again. There were a number of seats left, but not three in a row. Marta and Roy sat together, and Carly settled into one by herself, which suited her fine.

She thought she'd seen Marta at school, but Roy was a complete stranger. The few times she'd let herself daydream about Journeying, she'd seen herself traveling with her best friends, comfortable in their companionship, laughing and excited. This was already far different, and she had only begun.

In the morning, they had to change buses in Omaha with a five-hour layover. A stoop-shouldered man and a plump woman in a pink and green jogging suit approached the three when they got off the bus. "Are you Journeying?" the woman asked, her kindly face creased in concern.

Roy shouldered his backpack. "What do you care?"

"You're endangering your immortal soul, if you are going to *that* place," the man said. He shoved a battered pamphlet at Carly. She backed away, clutching her bundle.

"My dears, it's the Devil's Playground up there," the woman said. "Go home before it's too late."

Marta knotted her fists. "Go home, yourselves."

"Didn't you Journey?" Carly said.

"Yes," the man said soberly, "I did, and I'll regret it the rest of my life."

"Why?" she asked. "What happened?"

His blue eyes glistened with unshed tears. "They—" he began, but then his voice choked off.

"I didn't go," the woman said primly. "My parents took better care of me than that."

Marta cocked her head. Her eyes glittered in her broad, plain face. "You didn't get the Call, did you?" she said to the woman. "I can always tell people who didn't."

"I didn't because the Devil has no hold on my heart!" the woman said. "I denied him utterly and you should too!"

"Come on," Roy said, lowering his head and ducking around the pair. "Let's get something to eat."

"You'll be sorry," the man called after them, then the pair were drawn off to confront another knot of Journeying teens from a bus that had just pulled up.

In the far corner of the seething bus station, there was a tiny Journeyers' station with a single volunteer handing out sandwiches. Carly's ham and cheese was stale, but she settled in a seat between Marta and Roy and ate all of it.

Roy was still fuming over the well-meaning couple. "There will be more like them. We have to stick together."

"Stupid cow," Marta said. "You can always tell the ones who didn't hear the Call. They look like dried up old sticks!"

Carly's eyes drifted closed and then she jerked upright.

"No, go ahead and get some sleep," Roy said. "It's hours before our next bus. I'll keep watch."

She huddled in the cheap plastic seat, pillowed her head on her bundle and let the voices and smells of the station wash over her. *A river surfaced inside her head, green-black and mysterious and there was skirling music.* It was cold up there, she thought muzzily, but refreshing, not painful. Deep within, she felt the vast pull drawing her north, ever and true north.

"Carly Marie Simmons?" A hand snatched her arm and pulled her to her feet.

"What—?" she opened her eyes to see a florid-faced man of about fifty staring at her. "Who are you?"

Baxter Reed," he said, "commissioned by your parents to take you home." Over six feet tall, dressed in black, he held a faxed copy of her picture out with his other hand.

"Let go!" She tried to free herself, but his fingers were iron.

"Hey!" Roy bounded to his feet. "Hands off!" His thin face looked determined.

"Son, this little lady is going home." Reed told him, "and if you have any sense, you will too."

Marta's seat was empty. Carly looked around wildly, her heart pounding. "You have no right! You're not my father!"

"I have your father's authorization," he said, dragging her across the station. People glanced at them, then looked aside, not wanting to get involved.

Roy followed. "That's illegal!" he said. "You can't interfere once she's started her Journey!"

Reed grinned over his shoulder. "Tell it to someone who cares. Believe me, she'll thank her parents for this someday."

So you never went?" Carly said.

The big man's eyes narrowed. "Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"The rivers up there are a green so dark, it's almost black," she said. "When you put your hand in the water, it feels like the heart of a glacier."

"Right," he said, forcing her across the threshold out into the heat of the Nebraska morning. Cars streamed past and the air reeked of gasoline fumes and hot pavement. He turned left and wove through the crowd toward the parking lot.

New images filled Carly's head. "When it rains," she heard herself say, "the drops are filled with dreams."

"You have got it bad," Reed said sourly.

Marta and Roy watched her from the door, but she knew they couldn't help. She checked her watch. Their bus would be in soon and they would have to go on.

"The trees talk and the rocks," she said, the words bubbling up from somewhere deep inside. "The mountains have a voice in everything that happens and even the wind knows your name. The rivers shine at night like the face of the sun so that you can see every fish and rock and plant on the bottom."

He stared at her as though she were a dangerous snake. "You don't know that."

"But I do," she said, "and you would have too, if you'd ever let yourself believe all those years ago."

Suddenly, he released her wrist and backed away as though she were white-hot. "How in the hell did you do that?" he whispered hoarsely, staring at his hand. "For a moment, I heard music like nothing I ever heard before."

"You did hear it once, when it was your turn to go," she said.

"You just wouldn't listen." Carly ran back to the station, then plunged through the doors. Just on the other side, Marta held out her bundle. "Did we miss our bus?" she asked the girl.

"No," Marta said. "Roy is getting our tickets."

"Even mine?"

"Yes," Marta said. "He said he could see it in your eyes, even when that idiot was dragging you off. Nothing is going to keep you from the North Lands."

From Omaha, they rode to Rapid City, and the bus was filled with Journeyers so that every seat was taken. The paying passengers looked at them out of the corners of their eyes.

"I wish I could go again," a woman next to Carly said.

"What was it like?" Carly asked, but her companion only shook her head.

"You'll see," the woman said, "and it will be with you all your life. You'll never be sorry you went."

In Rapid City, the Black Hills rose on the western horizon, enticingly close. "They're beautiful," Roy said, "but nothing like the North Lands."

Again, they secured food from the Journeyers' Aid Society, this time crackers and tomato soup, along with small bags of toiletries. In three hours, they were on their way again, this time to Billings. Their numbers had increased, so that they had to wait a whole day in Billings to take a bus to Helena.

Some of their fellow Journeyers were animated, talking about the North Lands and what they would find, but most were silent. Why did Journeyers experiences vary so widely, Carly wondered. Why didn't everyone find the same things, or feel the same way, when they came back? And why did some of them die?

Helena was mobbed, even this late in the season. She saw a few children as young as twelve mixed in with the crowds and a few more stunned-looking individuals as old as twenty. At fifteen, she was solidly in the middle, neither early, nor late as she'd feared.

"It's a sacred time," one earnest pimple-faced boy was telling any one who would listen. "We have a responsibility to remember and spread the word when we come back."

"But I've asked and asked, and no one who's been ever can tell what happens," Carly said. "What makes you think we'll be any different?"

"They just didn't try hard enough," he said, "that's all."

The bus, when it was time, carried only Journeyers. Some were jubilant, cheering, but most of the rest just hugged backpacks or duffelbags, staring out the windows at the rolling gold and green plains that bordered the North Lands.

Marta, Roy, and Carly sat together, second row from the front. In the distance, the mountains emerged on the horizon. Carly stood by the window, spread her fingers on the glass as though she could reach through and touch them. They were real. All this way, she had felt them drawing her ever north, but now to see them—she felt transformed in some inexplicable way.

Sometimes they passed Journeyers on foot, bikes, motorcycles, or even horseback. At first, the bus passengers called to them and waved, but after a while, they all fell silent, watching their counterparts fall behind.

Marta, who had seemed so sure, grew apprehensive. "Stop the bus," she whispered to no one in particular. "I've changed my mind. I don't want to go!"

"No, it will be all right," Roy said, but Carly thought he sounded far from certain. He had told them early on that both his parents had gone to the North Lands in their day and were now eager for him to have the experience. Never doubting, he had come, but now there was apprehension in his gray eyes.

Something prickled at her awareness as they rode, a thin-edged keening almost like music. Their bus lurched over the increasingly bad roads. The music grew louder and she found herself humming along. It had an insistent rhythm, but no tune, and wandered off first in one direction, then another. Marta stared at her from time to time, but said nothing.

Through the morning, the mountains grew, filling the horizon, granite peaks, rising far above the tree line, naked rock at the top, dotted with snow packed cirques and glaciers. The trees were evergreens, pines and firs, green-black and tall, except where avalanches had created chutes for wildflowers.

Streams cascaded out of the snowfields, bounding down the sides of the mountains. Carly could feel their thrumming beat in her blood.

Just after noon, the driver pulled up before a rushing stream and a narrow footbridge. A large Journeyers' Aid station stood on the near side. "This is as far as I go," he said, opening the door. "When you're ready to go back, you can board here, or there's a number of other egress points to the south and west. The station has a map. I recommend you pick one up before you go in. It's up to you to find your own way out. No one will come in after you—ever."

The Journeyers filed off the bus, then milled before the station, some excited, others overwhelmed. The moment Carly's foot touched the ground, the music inside her head surged. She felt aglow with it, as though she were playing the one true song of the universe.

"Let's see what the aid station has before we cross," Roy said. "It may be a long time before we get any food otherwise."

Carly was staring up at the mountains, her ears ringing.

Roy took her arm, then lurched back, staring at his hand as though he'd been stung. "What—"

Marta, who had sat next to her on the bus, edged away. "She's been broadcasting music all morning like some kind of stupid radio. It's driving me crazy. I thought we were coming out here to get away from all that!"

"I—" Carly put her hands over her ears, fighting to turn away from the song. "I'm sorry. I'll stop."

Marta shook her head. "It's—"

"I don't know."

"Right." Roy looked grim. He hoisted his backpack and trudged toward the aid station.

The air seemed somehow brighter than in the city, as though its molecules sparkled. Every breathful tingled all the way down into the lungs, as though it was not air at all, but something headier. Carly followed her companions, telling herself she did not hear the ongoing song. Her bones did not resonate with it, nor her blood cry out with its melody.

A simple footbridge crafted of undressed wood crossed the cascading creek and many kids had already dashed over it, too eager to be practical and pick up supplies. Carly watched them, a sheen of perspiration on her forehead despite the cool air.

Roy returned with extra packets, which he handed her. "Concentrated trail rations," he said. "Enough for two weeks, they said, if you portion it out carefully."

"Thanks," she said and unwrapped her bundle.

"I picked you up a jacket too," he said, thrusting brown corduroy at her. "They have racks of donated ones, and you didn't bring anything warm enough for the nights up here."

It was threadbare, but serviceable. Turning it over in her hands, she wondered how many Journeyers had worn it over the years. "You're not going with me, are you?"

"This is scary enough," Marta said, "without trying to do it with a freak." Her face was implacable.

"Fine," Carly said. If she went on alone, then she wouldn't have to shut the music out, she thought, and that was all the company she would need.

"Well, good luck," Roy said and turned away. She watched her two companions walk across the bridge and disappear on the trail leading toward the mountains.

Now, said the music, *you are here. Now you will know everything.*

She put on the jacket and crossed the bridge herself, pausing in the middle to gaze down at the water, smooth and diamond-backed where it was deep, shattered into spray where it struck the rocks. Shapeless and yet shaping, cutting ever deepening banks. There

was some truth down there, something she was just on the edge of understanding

"You're in the way!" a voice said from behind

She turned to find a knot of teenagers staring at her impatiently. Most of them were pale, but one had bright red cheeks as though in the grip of a fever "Sorry " She burned on across, then gasped as her feet touched the ground

It was as though life burst up through her soles, as though her circulation had been cut off but was now finally—painfully—returning The music was so loud, she could hear nothing else, though several of the group tried to speak to her She limped aside to make room, then watched as they hiked off into a stand of blue spruce

Sweat broke out on her face and she had to sit down, huddled against the overwhelming sensations Music threaded through her thoughts, changing everything, until she could not even have told anyone her own name Three more groups crossed the bridge and passed her, some chattering like sparrows, others silent and fearful. Then the bus pulled away and another took its place

The afternoon passed and the voice of the creek changed, as though the lengthening of the shadows affected it Several times, she got to her feet and started to walk, only to sink to her knees again as the strange sensations overwhelmed her

She was wracked with despair How could everyone else go in so easily while she was mired out here on the fringes? Obviously, Roy and Marta been right to abandon her.

Summer twilight was long and protracted at this latitude. It settled over the mountains and hills in a haze that hid nothing When the moon, pale and gibbous, finally rose to the south, she attempted to rise one more time and found she could walk if she took it slowly

It was at the bridge that a path branched away through the trees. It had been cut through by many pairs of boots. Far more, she had decided, than could be explained by the small troupe of teenagers she had seen pass by earlier.

There had been no buses for several hours now, so she was alone. The aid station had closed for the night, the volunteers retreating to their trailer. Following the trail, she wound upward into the trees, over fallen needles that muffled her footsteps and filled the air with pungent pine The music still twined through her mind, but it was not overwhelming, as it had been when she first crossed the bridge

Surface roots formed steps as she climbed in the darkness under the trees, turning, backtracking, then gradually coming to parallel a chattering ice-melt stream Occasionally, she heard laughter, whispering voices, footfalls, but never saw anyone. A four-point buck emerged and kept pace with her, showing no fear, its night-dark eyes appraising her as though this were a test.

Finally, she emerged into a high meadow at the foot of a mountain and the buck sheered off to remain inside the trees Someone was sitting on a boulder, and she could see another dark figure standing at the meadow's far end, limned by moonlight "Don't go any closer! You'll scare him!" the person on the rock said and she recognized Roy's voice.

She laid her bundle down and gazed up at him "What are you doing up there?"

"I—" His glasses glinted in the moonlight and his voice was filled with misery. "I lost part of myself "

The tiny figure at the end of the meadow waved. "Is that Marta?" she asked

Roy pressed his forehead to his knees "No, it's me "

She stepped out into the moonlight and gasped. Inside the trees, the music had been subtle, full of eddies and swirls, but quiet enough that she could still think her own thoughts Now, it became a symphony that clashed and boomed.

Roy shuddered "Every time I try to get myself back together, *he* runs away. This is as close as I can get without driving him off " He looked down at Carly "Would you talk to him? I don't know how I can ever go home, split up like this

"Sure," she said "Just stay here "

She picked up her bundle again, shivering The air was colder out here in the open and she could see her breath even against the gathering darkness Elk were grazing in the meadow, but they ignored her as she followed the trail through patches of asters and columbine Ahead, up on the mountains, she could see an icy glimmering among the rocks, as though pale flames of some sort had found fuel

No doubt the person who'd waved was Marta she thought, or someone else making their journey Roy was just unnerved She would take whoever it was back to show him, and then he would be able to go on

Her sneakers were soaked with the evening dew by the time she'd crossed the meadow The person at the far end was watching her now with star-filled eyes, hands thrust into pockets. A cool light seemed to crawl over its outline as though it reflected the moonlight in some way

"I won't go back!" it cried out as she drew near

She stopped, the nape of her neck prickling "Roy?"

"Part of him," the figure said, "the best part, actually He was afraid when he saw the lights up in the mountains, so I left him back there If he wants me, he'll have to keep up "

"He…" she began, but could think of nothing persuasive "He's afraid," she said finally "You can't blame him."

"He can keep his fear," the second Roy said. "I don't need it!" He disappeared into the trees with only the crash and crackle of breaking undergrowth to mark his passage

She felt a sort of lingering, as though something within were in danger of being leached from her For a moment, she was tempted to go back to First-Roy and keep him company. Lingering in this beautiful meadow would be prudent That way she could get used to this strange place and take no risks until she was more sure of what she was doing

Glancing down, she saw that her hand under the moonlight was curiously double For a second, she seemed to see out of two separate sets of eyes, the view rapidly differentiating, then she heard the music again, sweet and wild

The two views merged and she was whole again. First Roy should embrace the music, too, she thought, and then he wouldn't be afraid She gazed up at the snowfields which were alive with eerie blue-white fire Up there that was where the music was telling her to go She began to climb again

The voice of the stream was a kind of music too, a harmony that wove in and out of that other music she'd been hearing for days now, to some degree, ever since the Call had first surfaced in her mind back in Springfield The green-black shadows under the trees gave off the beat, softly thrumming in the night The moonlight was a descant and the temperature continued to fall, so that she was glad of the threadbare jacket

The beat grew louder as she walked, more demanding, overriding all other sound Without thinking, her steps fell into its rhythm Rounding a bend in the trail, she came into a small clearing beside the stream where a number of large furry shapes lay slumbering in her path She could hear the soft whuff of their breathing as she edged past and the air was filled with a rank animal smell

"What is—it?" The voice was slow and grumbly One of the shapes levered itself onto its four feet, taller at the shoulder than a pony.

"I'm sorry." Carly's fingers twisted in the knot of her bundle and even her words seemed to fall into the night's strange, pulsing rhythm. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

Black bottomless eyes gleamed in the moonlight as the creature reared onto its hind feet.

It was a bear, she realized with a start. Its coat was blacker than the night sky. The music she'd been hearing faded, leaving only the immense beat throbbing up through the ground. A second shape also heaved to its feet, throwing its head back and roaring. The sound reverberated through the trees.

She stumbled out of its way. "Go back to sleep!" she said as her heart raced. "I'm leaving."

"No!" A third shape rose, smaller than the other two. "Join us." The voice was low and rough, but the timber familiar.

"Marta?" she said.

"The great mysteries are strong here," Marta said and shook herself. "This is what we've been Journeying toward. You don't have to go any farther."

The girl edged into the moonlight where Carly could see her more plainly. Her former companion's ears had enlarged, her untidy brown hair had darkened into the ruff of a bear's fur. Her nose was longer, the tip darkened, but her eyes were still human.

A cold chill ran down Carly's spine. "What happened to you?"

"Bear Clan accepted me," Marta said. Her teeth flashed strong and white in the moonlight. "If you stay, you might be accepted too."

The largest bear dropped down to all fours and charged, neck bristling, teeth bared.

She closed her eyes and held her ground, though her legs shook and she was inundated in gamy bear smell. A cool, quivering nose snuffed her cheeks, her neck, the top of her head. "It is not afraid," the low, grumbly voice said in her ear. "We might indeed accept such a child."

Carly's eyes flew open. What would it be like, she wondered, living with bears? Was this what she had come so far to find?

The raw kinetic power humming through the ground took charge of her feet and she found that without volition she was moving in time with it. Her heart beat with the same rhythm, her breath, even the blink of her eyes. Her entire body thrummed and she felt her body swelling, coarsening, her ears lengthening. "No. I can't stay here," she said, fighting to free herself. "The music is too different. It's all beat with no melody."

The dark shapes who had been sleeping on the bank rose, so that she was surrounded by a multitude of bears who gazed at her with glittering black eyes. "So you feel our Bear Dance," the largest said. "Is it not glorious?"

"..." Carly fought to make her traitorous feet carry her back into the night. "I need the melody, too. This is not enough for me!"

"Bear Dance is power!" the huge, grumbly voice said. "The very heart and sinew of the universe! How can it not be enough?"

She closed her eyes, hummed a scrap of the melody she'd been hearing for days and it seemed her unwilling feet slowed, that the powerful rhythm's grip eased.

"Smell this puny creature again," one of the other bears said. "It is not for us."

The largest bear roared with frustration, and then Carly found herself running into the darkness, careening off unseen trees, whipped by branches, tripped by roots and rocks. The breath sobbed in her chest, but when she stopped, winded and bruised, she could at last hear it again, the endless twining song that had brought her all this way. She dabbed her bloodied cheek with the back of one hand and resumed her ascent.

An hour later, Carly encountered a coatless woman huddled against a fallen lodgepole pine. She had tied her lank brown hair back from a punched face striped with scratches.

"Have you seen my son?" the woman asked, her skin haggard in the moon's half-light.

Carly thrust her cold hands into her pockets. "What's his name?"

"Erik Cooper." The woman shivered, then struggled to her feet. "He left Minneapolis to make his Journey last year, but then he never came home." She darted forward to seize Carly's arm. "I have to find him!"

Carly tried to wrench free. "I haven't seen him."

"Take me with you!" the woman said, tightening her grip. "The trees keep shifting around and the rocks creep into different formations so that I can't find my way out. Every path seems to lead back to here. Maybe they'll stand still for you."

"You shouldn't have returned to the North Lands," Carly said. "You only get one chance to come here. Everyone knows that."

The music was clear here, though it had a thin edge, like the ring of crystal about to shatter. She was so tired, her legs simply folded and she found herself sitting on a bank of flat, water-smoothed stones, each the size of a silver dollar, perfect for skipping. Pine saturated the air like fine perfume. The moon had already set, but the dark water was alive with stars.

"But my son is lost," the woman said. "I can't just abandon him!"

Carly struggled, finally managing to twist free. Erik's mother sank to the ground and covered her face with both hands, weeping. Carly hesitated just long enough to pull a handful of trail ration packages out of her bundle and toss them at the woman's feet. "Follow that trail back down," she said. "The crossover point is not that far away."

"I've tried and tried, but I can't get out," the woman said. "This place will never release me. I know that now."

"If you're still here when I come back," Carly said, "I'll take you with me, but I can't now. If I leave, I'll never be able to come back."

Weeping followed Carly into the night as she turned her face back to the high country and resumed her climb.

Close to dawn, Carly emerged onto the rocky shore of a lake nestled beneath a towering cliff. The stream she had been following fed out of this body of water, and above, the silvery threads of a waterfall cascaded down, born of the snowfields.

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She stared, entranced, unable to look away.

"They're always here, even in the daytime," a voice said from the trees.

Carly looked over her shoulder into the shadowed face of a boy, who seemed very young for Journeying, perhaps no more than twelve. He stood so that pine boughs framed him, as though he were part of the trees.

"You mean the stars?" she asked.

"They're beautiful." He edged out. "But they won't let me leave until I understand." He was thin and leggy, with hollows in his face

as if it had been a long time since his last meal. Even though it was so cold that ice rimed the lake shore, he'd taken off his jacket and tied the sleeves around his waist.

"Understand what?" She opened her bundle and offered him a ration bar.

"Dunno. Has something to do with being connected to all this." He waved the bar away. "Can't eat nothing like that up here. Tastes like sawdust, makes me sick."

She tore the paper off and took a bite of granola flavored with cinnamon. "No, it's OK." she said and held the bar out.

He shook his head, then hunkered down beside her. "OK for you, maybe, not for me. We each have our own rules. You'll find out."

"I don't understand." She chewed slowly.

"You've just arrived, haven't you?" He regarded her with narrowed eyes. "The rules are different for everyone, depending on what you bring with you, what you need, and what the North Lands want from you." He gestured at the dark lake.

With a start, she realized the stars, no longer visible in the sky overhead, still shone down in the water. They glimmered beneath the surface, hypnotizing and allluring.

"The lake wants me," he said, "so I've got to stay until I understand, if I ever do."

The sky was steadily brightening back to the east and the pale shimmering fire she'd been following up in the snowfields had faded. Unutterably weary, her eyes fluttered closed, then, with a start, she forced them open. The melody seemed subtly off-key here as though it were being generated by out-of-tune instruments.

"Your name isn't Erik, is it?" she said, thinking of the lost mother down below in the trees.

"No, I'm Heath," he said. "Lots of Eriks around, though, along with Heathers, Jans, Marys, and Bills."

Two girls appeared halfway around the shore and sat on a fallen log, arms entwined. One laughed and the sound carried across the lake. A fish leaped, then fell back with a splash that rippled across the water.

She would sleep just for a little while, Carly told herself. Then she would go on. She stretched out on the smooth stones, pillowed her head on her bundle and closed her eyes.

It seemed she was a slim, silver minnow, hiding among gently waving plants, watching turtles and trout glide through the open water in search of their next meal. So small, so tasty, so vulnerable. Her life was tiny, a minute scrap of awareness, just large enough to contain terror.

There were stars embedded in the water, too, incandescent sparks that sizzled and spun. She wanted to explore, but was afraid.

You must ask for what you want, a star said in a voice so bright, it was immediately burned upon her soul.

"I don't know what I want," she said, cowering among the green plants. "I never have."

Wakeful purpose, that is the problem, is it not? the star said, spinning faster and faster. *That is always the problem.*

Enticed, she ventured out then and a long, fierce pike turned her way, hunger incarnate on the prowl. She fled, but not fast enough. The pike's teeth closed around her small body and—

She woke, shuddering, one of the flat stones clutched in her hand. It seemed to vibrate with a life of its own. With a cry, she threw it into the water. The dark lake rocked with concentric ripples, which gradually faded until she could see the stars in its depths again.

"That was one of the frightening ones, wasn't it?" The boy, Heath, hunkered down beside her. "You have to be careful which dreams you pick." He gestured at the bank of water-smoothed stones. "There are some good ones here, too." He picked a stone up and held it to his cheek. "This is a dream of swans and their cygnets in the spring. Why don't you try it?"

The sun was climbing toward midmorning. She had slept for hours. She ran trembling fingers back through her disordered hair. "You mean each of these stones contains a dream?"

"Yes." His fingers traced a blue vein that ran through the rock. "You could save it for later."

He handed it to her and she slipped it into her pocket. Then the music crept back into her awareness, thin-edged and manic, subtly off key, abrading her like rocks scraped together. She shuddered. "I have to go!"

"If you can," Heath said. "Mayhaps you can't. Won't know, I guess, until you try." He gazed at the dark water, eyes hungry. "None of us ever do."

The music spooled crazily inside her head, flying with a wild beat that lurched into dissonance every few phrases. She felt sick with it. If she stayed here, she would go insane, she knew suddenly.

She snatched up her bundle and headed back into the trees, the feral music skittering along her nerves. The green darkness closed around her and gradually the music faded, displaced by the thump of her feet on fallen pine needles, the rise and fall of bird song, the breeze surging through the trees.

She could not find a trail this time and the branches were thickly woven, so that she had to duck and force her way through. Her bundle kept snagging. She passed a group of boys who turned their backs, silent and unresponsive, and then later two girls who stared up at a pair of capering squirrels, their dirt-smeared faces transfixed, as though the creatures were exquisite works of art.

Finally she dropped to the ground beneath a lightening-struck cedar, a hot aching knot in her chest and drenched in sweat. What was she doing up here? No wonder her parents had never given in to the Call. This was pointless and crazy. She should be home, shopping for school clothes and supplies, getting ready for a new school year—

A cardinal landed on the tree opposite, a white-barked birch that stood out in the gloom like a ghost, and stared at her with bright-black expectant eyes.

"What do you want?" she asked the cardinal, certain that, in this strange place, even the birds were more than they seemed.

It blinked as though it did indeed have secrets, then a pair of black and white magpies fluttered to the branch below it.

"Go away!" She flapped a hand at them, although she couldn't say why the birds discomfited her. "Shoo!"

Three dull blue and gray birds converged and perched on the next branch down. She recognized them from pictures she had studied—stellar jays. Uneasy, she climbed back onto her feet.

One of the jays squawked. A magpie joined in, then all of them so that she was inundated in a strange off kilter version of the music that had been in her awareness for days.

"Stop!" She covered her ears with her hands, but the bird chorus only grew louder, more insistent.

Four tiny gray birds with black eyes, no larger than sparrows, arrived and added their voices to the cacophony. Carly snatched up her bundle and fled, but the birds followed. Taken individually their songs might have been pleasant, but screeched out, one on top of the other, they were unbearable.

With a swoop of black wings, ravens joined the fray. She kept to the trees, avoiding clearings, but the odd flock swarmed after her, persistent as angry bees.

Finally, she could run no farther and sank to her knees on the fallen needles and leafmold. A whole forest full of birds of every description filled the branches around her, each singing its individual song.

"What?" she cried. "What do you want? I don't understand!"

The bird calls died away, then a fat, glossy raven hopped down to the ground and strutted before her. Its black feathers gleamed with iridescent fire. "They are trying to wake you up," it said in an unmelodious squawk-voice.

"I—I am awake," she said, hugging her bundle to her chest, "so they can stop now!"

"You have never been awake," it said, "but you are getting close."

The hard calls began again, quickly building, battering her senses.

"Stop!" she cried. "I can't stand it!"

The raven blinked and cocked its sleek black head. "Why?"

"It's like the grate of iron over bare iron."

"You mean the discord," the raven said.

She nodded, hands pressed over her ears.

"There is harmony within it, if only you can open yourself enough to find it," the bird said.

"Just let me go," she said. "I'll even leave the North Lands, today if that's what you want."

"You have to find the harmony in yourself," the raven said. "Then you can hear it in others."

"There is no harmony."

"There is," it said calmly and hopped onto her knee. Its eyes were bright, like the stars bound into the lake, and as endlessly black as the night sky. She gazed into them, lost for the moment as though she had passed into some other realm.

"Find the ancient rhythm," it said. "If you can change yourself, you can change the world."

Without volition, her eyes closed. She felt the throb beneath the seemingly chaotic bird song, a steady thrumming that paralleled her own heartbeat.

"Yes," said the raven. "Even so."

Her hold on the sheet bundle eased and she found she could breathe again. Individually, the songs were sweet, but taken together, they were more than that. They were … powerful.

When she opened her eyes again, blue dusk had fallen. Most of the birds were gone, but the pair of magpies remained, along with the raven. She looked around. "I wasn't asleep, was I?"

"No," the raven said, "you were breathing in rhythm with the world."

She felt the slow, steady beat within now, as though it were a part of her. She eased onto her feet, brushed leaves and needles from her jeans.

"You should stay down here and learn more before trying to go farther," said the raven.

With a crackle and a curse, three bruised and tattered girls broke through the trees to stare at Carly and the bird. "It's talking to you, isn't it?" the leader, a skinny redhead, demanded. Her cheeks were flushed.

"I—" Carly began.

"Oh, don't bother to be. I know it is!" The redhead scowled at the raven, which fluttered into the trees. She gazed after it, tears in her eyes. "It's not fair! We've been up here for weeks and nothing ever talks to us! Nothing!"

"Maybe you don't listen," Carly said. It seemed like everything talked to her. In fact, she couldn't get this place to shut up and give her a moment's peace.

"Oh, right!" another of the girls said, this one tall and rangy with bleached blonde hair. "Like we haven't tried!"

With the sunset, the blue white fire of the icefields had returned. Carly could see the glimmer high on the mountains, making the peaks shine like beacons. That was where she had to go. What would the music be like that high up? She ached to find out. "I have to go." She picked up her bundle.

"We're going with you," the redhead said.

"No, we're not!" the tall, leggy blonde said.

Carly squirmed under the low branches of a pine, wishing there were a trail to make this easier.

"Things talk to her!" the redhead said. "If we go with her they'll talk to us too. Then we can get out of this god-forsaken place!"

"I want to go now," the third girl said plaintively. She was round-faced with a decided limp, as though she'd taken at least one hard fall. "I don't care if anything talks to me. I bet they just all make it up anyway. Things don't really talk."

Their chatter drove out the music. Carly couldn't hear anything beyond the thump of her feet and the scritch of branches against her jacket. "Go away!" she said over her shoulder, but stubbornly the trio followed.

It was hard work, climbing in the increasingly dim light.

Twilight was gradual, the stars appearing one by one in the deep blue of the night sky. Carly's lungs labored in the thinning air and more than once rocks rolled under her shoes so that she fell.

Her three unwanted companions trailed after her, but their complaints dribbled away as they fought to keep up. Sometimes, she thought she could still hear the beguiling music, but then the wind would shift and it would be gone.

The trees grew smaller, more stunted, thinning out until there were only a few, twisted trunks no higher than her waist. The plants were smaller too, growing low across the ground, rather than up, to avoid being blasted by the winds. She stopped at a small ice-melt lake to drink and saw the yellow-white moon trapped within, though the other had yet to rise in the sky.

She stared at the image, transfixed.

"What?" the redhead demanded, coming up behind her and craning her head to see. "Is something talking?"

"Oh, give it a rest, Tracey!" Valerie, the blonde, pleaded. "It's all bogus! I don't care what anyone said, nothing in this stupid, awful place talks!"

Carly knelt and trailed her fingers in the water, leaving in their wake a pale blue phosphorescence. Music trilled up her arm, so sweet it took her breath away.

"Daughter, why do you tarry?" the moon-in-the-water asked in a deep, sonorous voice.

"You're so beautiful," she said, feeling as though she would be content to just kneel here forever.

"Who are you talking to?" Tracey jerked Carly back onto her feet, then recoiled, staring at her hand, as if touching her burned. "What in the—?"

"The heights have secrets to tell you," the moon said. *"Keep climbing."*

"She's playing music, like some kind of CD!" Tracey said.

Carly turned to go, but Valerie's tall figure blocked her way. "Not so fast!"

"Make them hear," the moon said.

She closed her fingers around Valerie's wrist and the other stiffened. "My—God," she said and tried to pull away.

"Be still and listen," Carly said. "It's what you came here for." She loosened her grip and let Valerie pull away, then began to climb again. The three girls huddled beside the tiny lake as she left them behind. Each step was harder than the one before, her lungs straining in the thin air, the wind buffeting in great gusts.

But she could hear the music so clearly that her whole body seemed to be playing it. The other moon, the one in the sky, rose, and the music deepened, as though all of creation was an orchestra and the moon just one more instrument. She could see the snowfields now, alive with their wonderful pale fire. Shapes moved within the light. Other Journeyers?

When she at last reached the edge, she stopped, winded and weary. Blue white flames shimmered over the snow without heat, and figures danced within, a few human, but most animal. She recognized wolves, moose, elk, rabbits, bears, deer, all keeping time to the overwhelming beat and melody that this place sang. Its pull was sweet and utterly compelling.

"Daughter, come and dance!" a moose said, but she hung back, afraid. If she gave herself to something so monumental, would she ever be able to return to just being Carly?

"What is this place?" she asked, her heart lurching painfully out of the powerful rhythm it had been keeping.

"This is where the two worlds overlap most exactly!" a grizzly bear flung over its shoulder.

"I don't understand." The bundle dropped from her nerveless fingers and she buried her face in her hands, afraid to look, lest she be drawn into the dance against her will.

Wings fluttered, bringing an icy heat that tingled across her face. She opened her eyes to see a great eagle landing in the snow before her.

"The world is shaped by your dreams," the eagle said, ruffling its feathers. *"But how will you dream if you are afraid to take that last defining step?"*

"I—don't want to lose myself," she whispered.

The eagle cocked its great head. *"How can you lose yourself in that from which you were made?"*

She swallowed hard as her feet tried to dance. "Some people never come back from the North Lands."

"That is their choice," the eagle said, *"what they have seen in their hearts they need to do."*

"What about the ones who die?" she asked.

"All things die when it is their time." It stepped closer so that its unblinking eyes were like bright moons, shining into her soul. *"Is this your time?"*

"I—don't think so."

The eagle preened at a flight feather with its beak. *"The dance will not wait forever."* It soared back into the heart of the blue-white flames. She sank to her knees, unable to enter and equally unable to leave. She had come so far, waited all her life for this, and now, at the brink, fear kept her isolated, however much she might have liked to join in.

The dancers took no more notice of her. She might have been a snag of deadwood. The eerie flames grew ever higher, the music more wild and alluring. A boy trudged slowly past her, staring at the fire in fascination, then plunged into the snow and joined the circle as though coming home at last.

She watched his feet take up the rhythm, the same rhythm that beat in her blood, that had throbbed through her for days now. And then she realized the music had been with her back home in her bedroom, and out on the highway, in St. Louis and Helena, Billings and Rapid City and all the points in between. *The music was everywhere,* if only you listened. She couldn't lose herself in it here. It had been a part of her for days now.

She peeled off her jacket, flung it aside, and stepped into the snow. It crunched as her feet sank and then the scintillating flames closed around her, so icy and perfect, as though she had plunged into the heart of a blue-white star. The world looked very different seen through this shifting prism of cold, crystalline light, she thought, as her eager feet took up the dance. It seemed flawless and beautiful, full of wisdom. Why had she waited even a second?

The animals danced, and her fellow Journeyers, few though they were, along with the stars and the moon, the rocks and the night wind. Their path was round as the world is round, beginnings and endings overlapped so that one thing was always becoming the other. She understood finally that nothing truly ever began or stopped, it just continued on in the dance.

Weeks later, when she returned home, she heard that Marta had come back several days ahead of her, but no one had seen Roy. Apparently, he was still in the North Lands, trying to bring the shattered halves of himself back together. His distraught parents contacted Carly to find out what had become of their son and whether there was any chance he would return.

Hollow-eyed, they perched on the flowered couch in her parents' living room, clutching one another's hands. She tried to tell them what she had seen and done, but her tongue would not form the words. She could see the North Lands so plainly inside her head, glittering and majestic, but what had happened there was not a tale for this latitude. The words simply would not come. "I'm sorry," she told them finally. "He was alive the last time I saw him. That's all I know."

In their eyes, she could see that in some measure they understood. They had traveled to the North Lands in their day, which was why they'd been so eager for Roy to go. And now they knew that nothing there could be explained by the rules of home.

She gave them the slim stone she had brought back with its embedded dream of swans in the spring, and then they went home to wait, perhaps forever.

Her own parents had taken her back despite their threats, but she would never again have the same easy understanding with them as before. The North Lands had changed her and, by doing so, touched them. They would never forgive her that.

Each night, as the world spun inexorably toward summer's end, she would slip out of the house after her parents fell asleep, climb

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a ladder onto the roof, lock her arms around her knees, and gaze up at the stars in the sky, remembering the ones in the lake, how they had burned and spun down there in the dark water, hinting at worlds beyond worlds.

One evening in the aftermath of a hard rain, Marta joined her. There was still something of the majestic bear in the way the taller girl moved, the lie of her hair, the starry glint in her eyes. "Home seems so different now," Marta said. "I can't find anything that's the same."

Carly breathed deeply of the rain scented air. Pale flames shimmered behind her eyes. "I don't want it to be the same."

The wind shifted and a few notes of that wondrous Northern music shivered through Carly's head as though somehow carried all that distance. *You must ask for what you want,* she heard faintly. Something glimmered inside her heart, almost within reach, something intoxicating. *Faraway, the rocks danced and the clouds and the deer.* "I think," she said slowly, "once you've learned enough, you're supposed to bring the North Lands back with you, so that *here* is more like *there*."

With a sudden hunch, she darted down the ladder to search the lingering rain puddles that shimmered across her parents' carefully landscaped yard.

After a moment, Marta followed. "What are you doing?"

Carly bent over a dark puddle brimming with stars.

Marta glanced from the earth to the sky, then back. "But—it's cloudy tonight. No stars are out. How did you know they would be here?"

"I didn't," Carly said, "but I decided to at least look."

Come closer, said the stars in the water. *We have tales to tell, secrets to share.* Wild music shivered through her bones, fring her blood, and then, behind the stars, she saw the dark familiar outlines of mountains and lumbering bears.

"There you are!" Marta dipped a double handful of cool rainwater and then whispered to the water in her cupped hands. "Hello." ❧

BY E. CATHERINE TOBLER ❀ ILLUSTRATION BY ZELA LOBB

INDIGO WITH DISTANCE

CAN WE EVER REALLY ESCAPE OUR PASTS—OR OUR FUTURES? IT ALL DEPENDS ON HOW FAR YOU'RE WILLING TO GO.

IT WAS RAINING WHEN NORIKO CALLED ME TO HER DARKENED room in the stony wish-jasmine mansion. The last time I spoke to either one of us cried, of the previous time, but Noriko's reason was different. At least I had been since the day I had come to Kyoto to study Japanese. Noriko told me. Mori-san died.

They found Mori near the docks, her robes wrapped around one of the farthest pilings. She was [illegible] her out, but she was dead, her eyes gone from velvet to milk-white, her slim fingers puckered [illegible] like her.

I CAME TO KOJIMA NOT OF MY OWN VOLITION, BUT THAT OF [illegible] my Japanese technology and commerce. One by one, companies sold out and the black ribbon high- [illegible] industrial hubs [illegible]

[illegible] my photograph and history in Edo, a slim book bound in violet leather that had changed many a life. Men and women both, printed on thin paper pages, up for sale or lease to whomever should [illegible]

Noriko contacted me in the late fall, as the rains were turning to snow. She had need of my abilities. The pay was good. I would have my own house, albeit small, on her property [illegible]

I left my family home in Gray Harbor without a word spoken to my father. He showed no remorse for what he had done to his only daughter. Ancient languages had little value in our technologized society, and I had been unemployed for months.

A miracle she wants you at all," he said.

[illegible] covered her. I promised I would write. We all knew I would not. Why express myself to my parents in letters when I had never done so aloud? They would find my silence familiar.

I crossed the Pacific by shinkansen, the bullet train. It was the only form of travel Noriko would [illegible]

shinkansen. My father assured me I would make enough money to buy myself a bicycle in Kojima

Noriko s boatman met me at the shinkansen station in Nakashima. He said only my name and it was muddled under his unfamiliar accent. Nakashima was a jumble of noise and sights that were new to me, but the boatman did not linger. He skipped ahead and I focused on his lime-colored shirt so as not to lose my way. Nakashima was a blurry memory by the time we reached the landing pier. There we boarded Noriko s boat and began the journey to her home

Kojima was a smudge of darkness against the day's failing light. Who could live in such darkness, I wondered. Knobby pine trees made themselves known as we neared the island. The darkness was saturated with their scent, not so unpleasant then. Than light punched through the trees to spill on the water

The boatman kept his silence until we approached the inlet that led to Noriko's home. His call lifted, sudden and sharp in the evening air. In reply, the hidden gate that lay in the water lifted. An echoing call sounded after we slid through

Golden lanterns lined the dock, running up stone steps that led to the pale house. I gathered my pack and managed to lunge from the boat, but as my feet hit the steady dock, my knees buck led and I sprawled in a heap.

I found myself looking at two brown bare feet. Slim ankles. A blue robe wrapped the legs in mystery and I looked upward, to a smile and slanted eyes. Min's cool hand wrapped around my arm and hauled me upward

NORIKO WAS TRANSLATING ANCIENT texts, so old that a good deal of the writing was worn away. She was not well versed in Latin or Greek and needed someone who was. The texts, she said, had been discovered among her father's things in Rome, and several museums had an interest in them. Noriko wanted to determine what they were before allowing any museum access.

There were five volumes, all thicker than my fist, and the mere sight of them thrilled me. I had not worked with real paper in a long time. The scent was intoxicating. Noriko guessed them to be family histories, but I soon discovered they were fictional stories. Fiction was something a tech-tired public would devour if given the opportunity.

Noriko's library was a small piece of heaven, with its vaulted and ribbed ceilings and tall windows. There were others working, but they focused on their own documents, leaving me to the crumbling pages found in Rome. My gloved fingers moved carefully over the ancient words

"Tell me what you've found."

Min sat in the chair opposite me, her eyes shining with anticipation. I had made little progress in the first book; the pages were too fragile to handle quickly. I smiled at Min and wondered why she had an interest in the books. Didn t she have parties to busy herself with?

"They are my grandfather's," she said. Her voice broke a little as she continued. "I never knew him, but always — always wondered what he collected."

Was wondering a crime? Min whispered as though it were

"This is a story about a princess," I said, referring to the notes I'd made. "She is on a quest for something."

Min's eyes widened and she grinned. "Treasure?" She shifted in her chair, her raspberry-colored robe rustling. "Love?" The second word was whispered, again as though a crime

"I don't know yet."

Min withdrew one of the polished wood pins from her hair and nibbled on it. She hooked a leg over the chair arm. The leg swung back and forth as she looked around the library.

"It's so quiet. How do you stand it?"

I could hear many things in what Min considered quiet. Men and women turned pages and breathed, coughed, sighed. There was the scratch of an old pen against fresh paper, the snap of a bird's wing from the large cage that sat in the east corner. I loved the room.

"My house is even more quiet," I said.

Like everything on Kojima, my house was a surprise. It was little more than two rooms, one for dining and another for sleeping, a loft above. The ladder was discarded behind the house, overgrown with vines. I'd stripped them away and climbed up to the loft, awed by the view from the small window. I could see the sea gate and beyond it Nakashima Island writhing like a dragon in dark waters.

"Aoki house?" Min asked. She withdrew the pin from her mouth. "By the blue tree."

"Yes." I looked back to the book for it was safer than the piercing questions in Min's glance. She was curious about me. I was unfamiliar, something she wanted to experience.

I focused on the next word in the text. *Longing*. When I looked up Min had gone, though her hairpin lay on the table, thrown into shadow by the afternoon sun.

THERE WAS A SOFT KNOCK ON MY DOOR as the sun settled in for its sleep that night. Min stood outside, dressed now in hues of blue and black, more proper for the evening's dinner, I assumed. I looked up the winding stone path to the house and could hear laughter.

"You will be missed," I said.

Min shrugged and her shawl slid off her brown shoulder, giving me a glimpse of her collarbone.

"No," Min said. "Mother has enough people to amuse; she will not miss me. Come."

Min pulled me into the evening forest. The air was cool and already smelled like rain. My sandals sank into the soft ground

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beneath us, though I didn't mind the mud on my toes. Min walked barefoot

She took me off the path, deeper into the old pines. We walked on fallen needles that masked the sound of our footsteps. Birds called to each other, flew low, and never seemed to notice us.

When the rain began, Min guided me toward a small cave. She laughed as we squeezed under the outcropping of rock, shoulder to shoulder.

"It has grown small since I was a child," she said. She shivered then and leaned into me. I wrapped my arm around her and our breath fogged in the cooling air.

It was there that Min kissed me. She turned her head and caught me in her obsidian gaze, her cheeks flecked with raindrops. She licked her lips once and then leaned against me. Her mouth was like a flicker of moth wings, a moth who is both afraid of the flame and yet must get closer.

Lightning cracked the sky open and Min bit me in her fright. I tasted the blood on my tongue a moment before she slipped away and vanished amid the evergreens. The red stained my fingers; Min's kiss stained my heart.

IKEDA OGAWA CAME TO NORIKO'S HOUSE twelve days after Min kissed me. Ogawa stayed for a month, and in that time I saw Min only once.

I questioned nothing. I was only an employee, brought to do a specific job. From the servants I learned Ogawa was an important businessman from Nakashima, one who had just taken over his father's holdings.

I kept to my work, still making my way through the first of the books Noriko had entrusted me with. I was afraid that every touch would dissolve the history a little more. I disliked that idea and my mind wandered to Min, to the rock shelter and the taste of her mouth.

I later saw Min in a boat headed for the sea gate. Her dark hair was unbound, flowing over her shoulders as the wind picked up. An unfamiliar man sat beside her, though by his suit I guessed him to be Ogawa. The boatman guided them out of the bay, toward Nakashima. The setting sun caught Min's tangerine robe and turned her to fire.

My day was unsettled. I could not concentrate on the books before me, so I left them rather than destroy them in my absent-mindedness. I wandered the grounds and explored Noriko's house barefoot. The door to her room was closed, though I heard soft voices beyond. I moved through halls unseen; I was a servant here and unimportant.

I found Min's room and hesitated at the door. My fingers hovered over the latch. It was cold when I finally touched it.

The room was simple, wild birds making their home in the blue and yellow flowers that grew beneath her windows. Min's bed was draped in lemon-colored cloth, pillows embroidered in scarlet. There was a sprig of evergreen at her bedside and I picked it up.

It smelled of the wet forest, of the night we had kissed. My tongue traced my lower lip. The mark Min had left on me was no longer visible, but it was still there. I replaced the sprig where I'd found it and left Min's rooms before I was discovered.

I WATCHED OGAWA SAIL AWAY ALONE ON a rainy morning. The boatman handed him a bright blue umbrella at the docks. I watched it until it became a small circle of color against the darkness of the distant island.

Min came to me that afternoon in the library and pulled me into a dark alcove that smelled of old paper and leather. She was shivering and wet from being outside and curled against me as though she wanted to crawl inside my vest. I held her, warmed her, and opened my mouth to her frantic kiss. Inside this room of history we began to weave new stories.

I did not ask her about Ogawa or her mother. Min had her duties just as I had mine. They were vastly different, but they were her own. She would tell me or would not; I didn't feel it was my place to question.

As the days passed and Ogawa grew to be a small memory, Min was happier. We stole time to be together and, though my work did not suffer, Noriko's long glances told me that she knew I was not being fully faithful to the Latin and Greek I'd come to serve. With Min by my side I did not care.

I took pleasure in her quick wit and her smile. She brought her chess set to my loft and we played until the light vanished from the room. Some evenings I read her grandfather's books aloud to her. Italian sand often slipped from the pages. Min would press her fingers over the grains and breathe deep to smell the foreign land.

Together we discovered the princess was on a quest to find her true love. How Min laughed over this common story. It was not common to her at all. She could not get enough of it.

"Does she succeed?" Min wanted to know. She begged me to look ahead, to read the ending, but I refused even when Min took to tickling me.

Min joined me at the pond one morning as I swam and washed. I asked her to come in, but she shied away. It was not nudity she feared, but the water.

I came out of the water and took her by the hands, leading her into the shallows. She gripped my neck, but wrapped her legs around me and bid me to go deeper. Her scarlet robe swirled around us, blood in clear water. I drew her closer and my palm grazed the swell of her breast, standing in sharp relief against the wet fabric. Min leaned into my touch.

"Teach me to swim," she whispered against my mouth.

I guided her back to the cool shallows where we taught each other how to fly.

MIN SHARED MY BED EVERY NIGHT, coming to me just as I was about to slide into sleep. I was never sure if she was a dream or genuine. Some mornings, I would wake and she would be gone save for the dent in the pillow beside mine. Some mornings, I would find her tangled in the sheets, as though they'd conspired with me to keep her there.

As the winter deepened, I concentrated more on the texts and pleased Noriko by finishing the first book sooner than anticipated. She added a bonus to my pay. I could have afforded the bicycle I'd once thought of, but the boatmen who worked the bay were easy to catch should anyone want to journey to Nakashima.

I spent one day on Nakashima alone. Min was with her mother, greeting the Ishikawa family who had recently moved onto the neighboring property. I stole away to walk amid the shops and restaurants, to eat my fill and drown my senses.

The scarf I purchased for Min lay against her bare skin the following afternoon. We lay on my thin pallet and she drew the evergreen fabric across her breasts, swearing that the brush of fabric was like the brush of my lips. I kissed her though the fabric and she pressed my ear against her chest. As her heartbeat thundered, I spied Noriko's form withdrawing down the ladder.

My own heartbeat became ragged, though I did not move from Min's side. When Min left me, I spent hours worrying. If Noriko wished to sever my employment, she now had good cause. When her summons came, my worry increased tenfold. Noriko wanted to see me at sunset and I was certain I would be dismissed. I was wrong.

"Five more volumes have been discovered," Noriko said to me as I stood before her lacquered desk. "It is quite a discovery, you will admit."

Five more. My heart leapt at the very idea of the books. More paper and leather and history. More strange stories of princesses and faraway lands, perhaps.

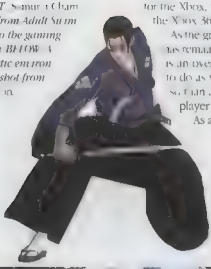
"The curator of my father's estate, however, is reluctant to let them go." Noriko's mouth twisted into something close to a smile. "He never thought the first volumes would arouse such interest."

Continued on page 86

By Eric Baker

New RPGs blend classic tales with new environments and updated graphics.

RIGHT Samurai Champion *from Adult Swim goes to the gaming screen BELOW* A *majestic environment shot from* Oblivion



Bethesda Softworks's count its new game ***Oblivion***, for the PC and Xbox 360, is the fourth in the *Elder Scrolls* series, which began with *Arena* back in 1993. From that beginning, each game has grown and evolved to keep pace with the computing environment. Arena, for instance, didn't require a 3D graphics card. *Oblivion* requires not only a 3D card, but a pretty recent one to show off all its pixel packed, shadowed, and flared beauty. The third game, *Morrowind*, was a launch title for the Xbox, the first *Elder Scrolls* game to appear for a console. Now *Oblivion* is the first RPG out for the Xbox 360, a system that lets it flex the power of its graphics and game engine.

As the graphics, interface, and engine of the *Elder Scrolls* series have grown and evolved, Bethesda has remained constantly committed to creating a game world that is both huge and wide open. There is an overarching quest that ties the game together, but there is a fantastic number of side quests to do as well, and there is no particular pressure to get on with the main quest instead. Far more so, than any other RPG series, *Elder Scrolls* gives the feeling of being in a living world where the player's choices are both plentiful and meaningful.

As an example of how *Oblivion* works, the player might take a quest to search a specific character's home. To find that character house, the player has to follow him home, but then the character is in the house, so the player can't search it yet. The player has to wait for them to leave. This not only makes sense, but isn't onerous because there are lots of other things the player can do in the world and then come back to the house later. The world depends on the player's actions, but it isn't always triggered by them.

All of the many characters and dialog trees in *Oblivion* are done with full audio. Players can choose to make their character from a variety of fantasy races. *Oblivion* has players actually play the game for a while before it has them choose a class and begin assigning characteristics. In fact, the game will suggest a character class to the player based on how he has been approached the game from the start.

Another thing that has stayed consistent with the *Elder Scrolls* games is that the characters gain experience and increase their skills and stats as the game goes on. Thus hitting an enemy with a spear increases the character's spear skill and strength, but doesn't make them any better at unrelated things like casting magic. A character's skill level is based on how much improvement it has earned, which can be a problem if singular isn't improving his combat skills along with their peaceful ones. Enemies scale to the players' character's level, so a 15th-level thief is going to face 15th level monsters, even if his fighting skills are only at level 5. Players who keep up their sword play or dangerous magic in addition to their peaceful pursuits will have no trouble.

Overall, *Oblivion* is a terrific and entertaining game that will consume hours and hours of the player's life whether he is playing on the PC or the Xbox 360.

At the other end of the spectrum is ***Bone: the Great Cow Race*** from Telltale Games for the PC. This is the second adventure game based on the popular comic book by Jeff Smith. This game picks up the events of the comic while the Bone cousins are still scattered and just beginning to learn about life in the valley. They all come together for the Great Cow Race, one of the true gem story lines in the *Bone* comic.

Eos

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Second Wave

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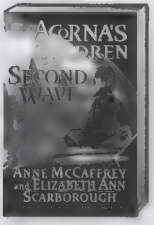

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Both *Oblivion* and *BtGCR* have a lot of dialog trees to work through, and both use full spoken text, but that is where the similarities end. *BtGCR* is an adventure game in the old-time mode of Myst, although funnier and less of a life commitment than the classic game. Players are presented with a mostly static background. They point and click their character through it, looking for clues, solving puzzles, and talking to NPCs. This is a story driven by adventure. Players don't feel like a character living in a world, they feel like the protagonist in a really good and really funny story.

The hardest thing for fans of *Bone* is going to be the first hour or so getting used to all their favorite characters having voices that don't sound at all like the ones the fans have been hearing in their heads as they read the comics. Artwise, however, no adjustment is needed at all. The pictures and animation are very true to the comic; it is very much as if the panels have come to life. There is a hint but ton that can be turned on or off and the game is as hard or as easy as the player likes, depending on how often one asks for hints. Fans of *Bone* will enjoy seeing one of their favorite stories told again. People new to *Bone* will enjoy the story for the first time.

Auto Assault for the PC is a MMORPG from NCSoft, the same publisher that presents the *City of Heroes* games. *City of Heroes* is done by Cryptic Studios and *Auto Assault* is from NetDevil, so it is understandable that *AA* has far more in common with *World of Warcraft* than it does with *CoH* despite the shared publisher. Set in a post apocalyptic Earth, *AA* pits humans, who are coming back to the surface after generations underground, against mutants, who lived through the dark years above ground, and Biomeks, the race humans created to fight the Mutants for them. Players can choose one of the three races to start with and each race has three different classes that players can choose to start as. Players can name and dress up both their humanoid avatar and the starting car in which they will actually spend most of the game.

The easiest way to understand advancement in *AA* is that the player levels his humanoid toon, and their car is its armor and weapons. The environment Town is used for crafting and shopping, and all the areas that are not "town" are for fighting. There is no penalty for dying beyond the time it takes to drive back to where you died from the repair stations.

The biggest stumbling block for players coming to *AA* is expectations. When thinking of a fighting car game, players may be tempted to think of the wide open highway chases of movies like *The Road Warrior*. In fact, *AA* is more like a demolition derby simulation, at least when it comes to combat. The enemies are mostly either in cars of their own or some sort of monster that is as mobile as a car, but boss enemies are tied to certain zones. So while the player will get some good speed on the shattered highways while traveling

from encounter to encounter, combat is much more a matter of circling and maneuvering, trying to point the car in the right direction while avoiding the terrain.

Taken on its own terms, *AA* is an interesting and inventive game with a decent back ground and some good features like built in voice chat when you're in a convoy and a very deep crafting system. The hard part is accepting the game's terms instead of wishing for a more "born to be wild" experience.

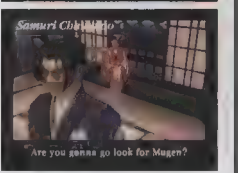
One of the surprise hits of 2002 was *Kingdom Hearts* for the PS2 by Square-Enix and Disney. It has taken 4 years, but ***Kingdom Hearts II*** is now on shelves. It features the return of Sora (voiced by Haley Joel Osment) as the hero with the Keyblade who must cut his way through the various Disney and Square worlds to save them from destruction.

Along the way, he is accompanied by a changing cast, but for most of the game his companions are Goofy and Donald Duck. This is a conceit that just doesn't get old, particularly when the party travels through Disney's more recent properties, *Tron* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Both Jack Sparrow and Barbossa are in the game. Even if it isn't Johnny Depp voicing Sparrow, Geoffrey Rush did give life to Barbossa. In fact, the majority of the voice acting in the game is either by the original actors or by the actors that have stood in for them on voice work before.

As with the previous game, fans of Disney are going to be happier than fans of Square. In this country at least, the Disney characters are just more familiar, and their stories are more straight forward, more susceptible to pairing down to single video game level than their Japanese brethren. On Square's side, however, is the game play, which will take minimal effort to pick up for any player who has ever been through a Square RPG. For people new to the controls, when set on basic

difficulty, the game is so easy they will have no trouble plowing through the puzzles and combat to get to the next interaction with a favorite character or scene.

Speaking of Japanese properties, Bandai continues to bring its anime to the PS2 with fierce regularity. This month it is ***Samurai Champloo***, which has been holding down a slot in Cartoon Network's Adult Swim lineup for long enough now that most Americans with an interest in anime probably are familiar with it. For those who are not, *SC* is one of the fusion Samurai animes in that it weds a feudal Japanese background with modern pop culture references and music. This is best displayed in the game by the mechanic wherein the player chooses the combat style for the character by going into a record store (yes, a record store in feudal Japan) and buy



ing the albums corresponding to the moves they want.

The game play itself isn't as interesting as *KH2*, although the form is similar, beat up a lot of things to get to the next cut scene. In *SC*, it is a whole lot of things. There are the special moves the albums provide, which when used in the right order on the right characters, result in the player being transported to a minigame that then gives them access to another special backfest. Armies of enemies die under the blades of the two protagonists. Each protagonist has his own stories with their own characters, although a few of the backgrounds are recycled.

For fans of *Dungeons and Dragons' Forgotten Realms* universe, the paper and dice version of that world, there is a new supplement out called ***Power of Faerun***. This is a book for dungeon masters with very high-level characters who have crawled through all the dungeons they can stand and aren't really in the mood for another classic adventure. *PoF* demonstrates how to construct a campaign so these players can setup more mundane, but more lasting challenges, such as role playing life at court, running a religion, commanding at war, or setting up a merchant empire.

Chapter seven of *PoF* deals with one on one high level encounters, like ancient dragons or other epic level adventurers, but the rest of the book is more a nuts and bolts guide to how the ranks and honors of the *Forgotten Realms* are distributed and maintained. In other words, this isn't a book that will tell the dungeon master the stats for yet another magic mace, but it will give them a glossary of handy common tongue words for traders to know. It is a good book on an esoteric level, additionally containing lots of specific examples of high-level characters and their followers of all sorts of races, professions, and nations that the dungeon master can use to build their own campaigns around.

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Of Metal Men

Continued from page 51

The man blustered and flushed, his eyes wild and his mouth working like a landed trout. He started to speak but Rudolfo shushed him.

Rudolfo stabbed a slice of orange with a small silver fork. "I will ask you questions; you will answer them. Otherwise you will not speak."

The man nodded.

Rudolfo pointed at Isaak with his fork. "Do you recognize this metal man?"

The man nodded again, his face now pale.

"Did you change this mechoservitor's script on the orders of Overseer Sethbert of the Entrolusian City States?"

"I... I did. Overseer Sethbert—"

Rudolfo snapped his fingers. A scout drew a slim dagger, placing its tip at the man's throat. "Just yes or no for now."

The man swallowed. "Yes."

The knife eased up.

Rudolfo selected another slice of orange and popped it into his mouth. "Did you do this terrible thing for money?"

The man's eyes filled with tears. His jaw tensed. Slowly, he nodded again.

Rudolfo leaned forward. "And do you understand exactly what you did?"

The Androfrancine apprentice sobbed. When he didn't nod right away, the scout refocused him on Rudolfo's question with a point of the blade. "Y-yes, Lord."

Rudolfo chewed a bit of pomegranate. He kept his voice level and low. "Do you wish mercy for this terrible crime?"

The sobbing escalated. A low whine rose to a howl so full of misery, so full of despair that it lay heavy on the air.

"Do you," Rudolfo said again, his voice even quieter, "want mercy for your terrible crime?"

"I didn't know it would work, lord. I swear to you. And none of us thought that if it *did* work it be so... *so utterly*, so."

Rudolfo raised his hand and his eyebrows. The man stopped. "How could you know? How could anyone know? Xhum Y'zir has been dead five thousand years. And his so called Age of Laughing Madness has long passed." Rudolfo carefully selected another honeyed cake, nibbling at its corners. "So my question remains: Do you wish mercy?"

The man nodded.

"Very well. You have one opportunity and only one. I can not say the same for your liege." Rudolfo looked over at the metal man. His eyes flashed and a slight trail of steam leaked from the corners of his mouth. "In a few moments, I am going to leave you here with my best Gypsy Scouts and my metallic friend, Isaak. I want you to very slowly, very clearly and in great detail, explain everything you know about scripting, maintaining and repairing Androfrancine mechoservitors." Rudolfo stood. "You only have one chance and you only have a few hours. If you do not satisfy me, you will spend the rest of your natural days in chains, on Tormentors Row for all the known world to see, while my Physicians of Penitent Torture peel away your skin with salted knives and wait for it to grow back." He tossed back the rest of his wine. "You will spend the rest of your days in urine and feces and blood, with the screams of young children in your ears and the genocide of a city on your soul."

The man vomited now, choking foul-smelling bile onto his tunic.

Rudolfo smiled. "I'm so glad you understand me." He paused at the tent flap. "Isaak, pay careful attention to the man."

Outside, he waved for Gregoric. "Bring me a bird."

He wrote the message himself. It was a simple, one-word question. After he wrote it, he tied it to the bird's foot with the green thread of peace but it felt like a lie. He whispered a destination to the bird and pressed his lips briefly to its small, soft head. Then he threw it at the sky and the sky caught it, sent it flapping south to the Entrolusian camp.

He whispered the question he had written. It sounded empty but he whispered it again. "Why?"

Continued on page 90

Hero

Continued from page 58

In the lie of the man who was lying, the liar told untruths, that my Master might resort to such tactics. Since he could not, he could not be my Master; therefore this is not the tale of him, and I, who went into the Land of the Dead at his side, cannot be telling it. There can only be silence now."

How did it all turn out?"

I don't know.

"Make something up.

"*Truly regrettable, I agreed, and I wept for* my Master as I drew my sword stealthily in the dark and ran him through, slipping the sword up past his groin, under his breastplate. With a hard, upward jerk I gutted him like a fish.

"He looked down at me in amazement and sputtered something, but only blood and foam poured out of his mouth and out of the immense wound beneath his breastplate.

"His blood splashed upon the ground before the Bone Gates. I touched the carvings and smeared blood on them, and the carven figures waggled beneath my hands like a net ful of fish, reconfiguring themselves to record even this latest folly of mankind.

Yet it wasn't a folly.

"I tell you I slew him because I *loved* him because only by this means could he die with his soul *entirely* pure, the tale of his deeds untainted by treachery.

And the gates of the Palace of the King of Death swung wide, and it was I who stormed in, leaning into my shield against the black wind, against all the terrors the place might hold.

It was I who burst into the inner hall, to confront the Dark Lord on his dark throne only to discover that throne empty.

Nothing there. Only dust and the echoes of my footsteps as I climbed the steps before the great seat and took into my hands the very bronze, plumed helmet into which my Master's face had vanished entirely when I left his corpse crumpled by the gate.

Yet. There. The helmet, in my hand.

It was the final step that completes a dance. I sat upon the throne. I put the bronze helmet on my own head. I receded into it, so that whoever I had been faded away.

Before my eyes, the walls of the bone palace thinned into mist, and I saw the stars beyond, and beyond the stars the wild, mad faces of the gods of war and of pain and of nightmares rising out of the universal darkness like an inevitable tide.

And I gained the secret my Master and I had come for. It was mine now, for I was the Hero. I had stolen his name. I felt the terror and despair of all those he had slain in the course of his wars, for how can there be a Hero without violence, and what is the Hero but Death, an ender of lives?

This palace was my own."

"*Or it would be, if you were telling the truth,*" I said. "*Of course* you are not."

Weeping still, he rose, helmet upon his head and covering his face, sword in hand. I could not see his eyes.

"The Hero must rise up and go into the world of living men, and there commit deeds of unspeakable atrocity so that men will admire him, and this must continue until he can recruit some companion, who would love him so much so desire that the tale of his deeds remain pure, that the Hero might gain release.

He raised his sword. I thought he was going to kill me.

I said, "It might work that way... in the story. Which isn't true. Which is over."

"For the Hero, perhaps. But no one loves a liar. No one will ever give *him* release."

He vanished into the night then, and I almost thought I had dreamed the entire episode, but for the war and plague, fire and death that followed in his wake like a tide over the subsequent weeks and months and years, for which such a farrago of lies can hardly be sufficient explanation.

That morning, I took up my own sword and put on my own helmet and set out after him. ❧

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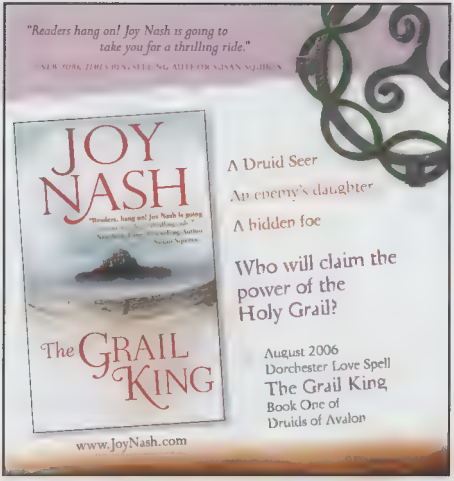
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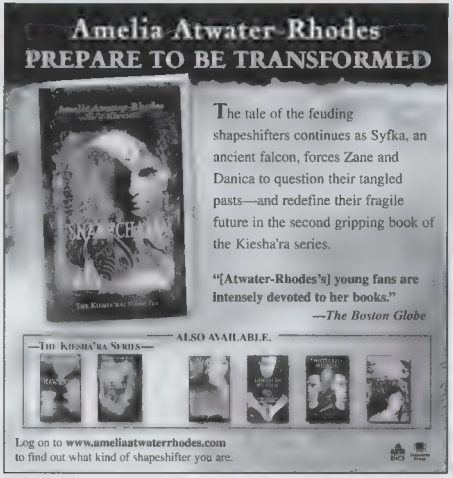
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Indigo

Continued from page 77

She laughed then and I found myself relaxing Perhaps I dreamed her intrusion this afternoon. My guilty heart had drawn her shadow into the loft

"I would like to hire you for another six months, although this will require your traveling to Rome," she said "I am willing to pay a fee equal to that which I paid your father, though this one will be yours alone, upon completion of the work."

I could not say no With such a fee, I could afford a home of my own and could perhaps be worthy of Min. I nodded

"Y-yes."

I wanted to tell her then of my feelings toward Min. That I loved her daughter, wanted to be with her Noriko dismissed me before I could speak the words and, hurried out by her secretary, I had to leave.

I was to leave for Rome in the morning, but could not find Min. Anxiety burrowed its way through my belly, she should have been easy enough to find. I found instead Noriko's secretary, who looked at me the way she might a half-cooked grain of rice caught between her teeth

"She is with her mother." She shooed me on my way

I returned to my little house and continued packing I did not want to spend my time folding clothes, but telling Min of this opportunity We would have a future that did not involve our parents' schemes. We would go where we pleased, when we pleased, and best of all we would do it together

As I rolled the pallet and returned it to the cabinet, I saw a light upon the bay. Fire sparked into the night sky, bright and strong I watched the light until it slipped outside the sea gate and was carried away by the rocky ocean waves. I took it for a sign of hope, of journeys about to begin.

"SHE WAS THE COLOR OF those robes," Noriko said and never pulled her eyes away from mine. "As blue-black as the deepest ocean water. They will believe, of course, Min slipped and fell She was not a good swimmer."

Noriko withdrew a slim book and opened it She took up a pen and began to write "You will leave this house It is of little consequence to me where you go You ruined my daughter and her pending marriage to Ogawa He would never accept an impure body."

The world faded to gray Noriko had built up my hopes, knowing I would never travel to Rome or have Min as my mate She allowed me to believe everything was possible, when truly nothing was. Min had not slipped and fire was not an omen of hope Fire covered murder Fire burned stain from Noriko's honor

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Noriko tore a slip of paper from the book and handed it to me. "Your fee for the translations. Although you will not be handling the books, you will take the money. You will speak to no one of this. You will not ruin the Ishuguru name as well."

Reality was a fist in my throat. I could not speak. When Noriko said nothing more I turned and left, breathing easy only when I stepped out into the rain. It washed the jasmine incense off my skin, but could not remove the sickness inside me. Blind in love, I had not seen what Noriko was, could not see that Min would never escape her parents as I had escaped mine.

I fell to my knees in the bushes and vomited until my stomach was empty. Min was lost, forever lost. By my hand, by Noriko's; together we placed her on a path she could not return from. I looked at Noriko's door and, before the latch could move, made to escape once more.

I walked the length of the dock without looking back, bag in hand, Min's hairpin buried under two of the five books I had yet to translate. Would the princess find her true love? I still had not peeked at the ending.

The boatman greeted me and offered an umbrella, though I refused its shelter. I wanted to feel the cool rain on my cheeks and appreciate every drop, for Min no longer could.

"Nakashima?" he asked me.

"Shinkansen station." I nodded, clutching the bag against my chest. Italy, I thought, with its warm shores, fragrant sands, and curator who had an interest in the books. I would go to Italy.

We were near the sea gate when I noticed the shadow in the water. I followed its sinuous path, watching as it slipped beneath the boat, around its prow, careful to avoid the boatman's oar.

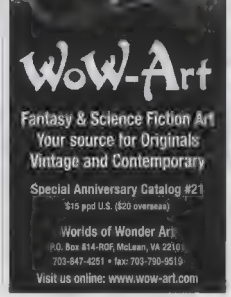
My grip tightened on my bag with its carefully wrapped books. It was a body in the water. As blue-black as the deepest ocean water. Velvet eyes flashed at me in a face serious as never before, hair streaming over her breasts like sea weeds. I lunged forward and gripped the slippery edge of the boat. The boatman grabbed my shoulder as if I meant to jump. I sat back, shaking my head.

The body followed the boat, silent below us, never breaking the surface. The boatman took no notice. Onward he rowed, through the driving rain.

I followed the creature, but as we passed through the sea gate, I lost it in the confusion of rain on the ocean. She had escaped after all. I dipped my hand into the water and came up with Min's scarf.

I pressed the streaming length against my lips. *Does she succeed,* Min wanted to know of the princess.

"Yes," I whispered, and watched Kojima grow indigo with distance. ❧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FOLKROOTS

Continued from page 24

In "Conversation With My Father" by Elline Lipkin (also published in *The Poets' Grimm*), the author offers a canny and wise girl who will not surrender her hands to her father. She "interlopes" down the aisles of a hardware store, a masculine world if ever there was one, intending to purchase a drill. Yet here amid threatening tools with "metal shapes that brag of power" she contemplates her relationship with her father. How much easier it might have been to born like the goddess Athena, "blasted out" of her father's head like a "sweep of clean logic." But she is not Athena, and her father has shaped her as something more fragile: a Thumbelina, a girl with breakable porcelain arms. In the hard violence of the folk tale, it is the father's will to sever his daughter's hands because he wants it, he needs it. But in this poem, the would-be armless maiden refuses to comply. She will not allow the essential nature of her adult identity to have been initiated by an act of power over her. "Each pointed finger is my true weapon," she proclaims, refusing to allow her father to memorialize this defining moment in her life by bronzing "the cut cups of my palms." In the traditional versions of the narrative, this violent act is essential to separate the girl from home and family and turn her out on a journey of maturation. The modern armless maiden has begun to question whether we should permit our lives to be defined by such external acts of power, acts that emphasize our vulnerability rather than our personal strengths. This theme is echoed in Loranne Brown's powerful novel *The Handless Maiden*, the contemporary story of a girl sexually abused by her grandfather. The child, a promising pianist, loses her hand in a violent altercation—but finds healing and purpose by the novel's end. Brown turns this grim subject into a story as loving and life-affirming as it is harrowing.

I have come to believe that robust narratives, such as the The Armless Maiden, speak to women not only when they are young and setting out on that first rite of passage, but throughout their lives. In *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, psychologist Clarissa Pinkola Estés presents a fascinating analysis of this tale, demonstrating the guiding role the armless maiden plays in a woman's psychic life. *The Handless Maiden* is about a woman's initiation into the underground forest through the rite of endurance. The word endurance sounds as though it means 'to continue without cessation,' and while this is an occasional part of the tasks underlying the tale, the word endurance also means 'to harden, to make robust, to strengthen,' and this is the principal thrust of the tale, and the generative feature of a woman's long psychic life. 'We don't just go on to go on; endurance means we are making something."

To follow the example of the armless maiden is an invitation to sever old identities and crippling habits by journeying again and again into the forest. There, we may once more encounter emergent selves waiting for us. In the narrative, the armless maiden sits on the bank of a rejuvenating lake and learns to caress and care for her child, the physical manifestation of her creative power. Each time we follow the armless maiden, she brings us face to face with our own creative selves. In an interview with Vicci Bentley of *Poetry Magazine.org.uk*, the British poet Vicki Feaver discusses the influence the armless maiden tales had on the way she perceives her writing process: "I read a psychoanalytic interpretation by Marie Louise von France in her book, *The Feminine in Fairytales* in which she argues the story reflects the way women cut off their own hands to live through powerful and creative men. They need to go into the forest, into nature, to live by themselves, as a way of regaining their own power. The child in the story represents the woman's creativity that only the woman herself can save."

Writing as the restored mother in her poem "The Handless Maiden," Feaver

> celebrates the resurgence of a woman's creativity. Restored to wholeness, the young woman sits on the bank, reveling in the newly discovered pleasures of attending her beautiful child. But as the child sleeps, "her heat passing/ into my breast and shoulder/ the breath I couldn't believe in," the new mother begins to cry, recalling the painful journey she has endured to reach this river. The poem ends triumphant, for even as she recalls with tears "my hands that sprouted/ in the red–orange mud" these are now also the hands that "write this, grasping/ [the child's] curled fist." The handless maiden has become the poet, articulating her own creative process, grasping the fruits of that work in the child's resilient "curled fist." Feaver writes, "In the end I chose the voice of the Handless Maiden herself—as if I was writing the poem with the hands that grew at the moment that she rescued her work, her child… I suppose I go through the process of endlessly cutting off my hands and having to grow them."

This may be the most illuminating lesson of the armless maiden. She teaches us not to fear, for even the wounded, sometimes abandoned, there is strength in our power to restore ourselves to wholeness not once but many times throughout our lives. She illuminates the missteps that come when we settle for partial solutions, allowing us to experience through the images of the tale, the stagnating effects of such acquiesce. She journeys with us during those times when we have to venture back into the forest, the sign of our new and vulnerable selves in the child tied on our back. And she is there to witness the moment of our restoration, when we finally reach with new hands for our voices, our lives, and our futures ❧

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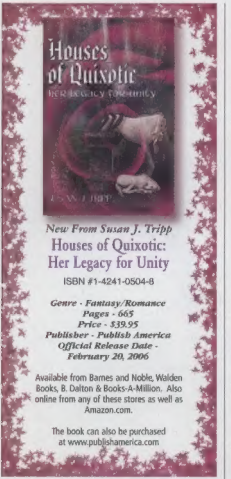

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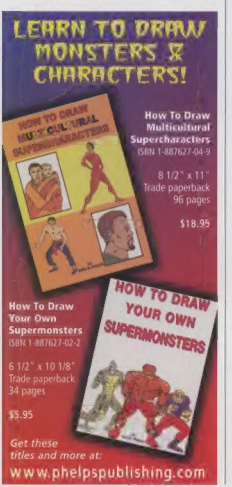

Of Metal Men

Continued from page 84

IT TOOK LESS THAN TWO HOURS. When Rudolfo returned to his tent, the metal man sat at the table, sifting through the pouch of tools and scrolls and the man was gone.

"Do you know enough?" Rudolfo asked.

Isaak looked up. "Yes, lord."

"Do you want to kill him yourself?"

Isaak's eyelids fluttered, his metal ears tilted and bent. He shook his head. "No, lord."

Rudolfo nodded and shot Gregoric a look. Gregoric returned the nod grimly and left in silence.

The bird had returned in less than an hour. His question had gone unanswered. Sethbert's reply had been terse: *Return to me the man you took. Surrender the servitor that destroyed Windwir.*

He'd had an hour to ponder the why. Ambition? Greed? Fear? The Androfrancines could have ruled the world with their magicks and mechanicals and yet they hid in their city, sent out their archeologists and scholars to dig and to learn, to understand the present through the past… and to protect that past for the future. In the end, he found it didn't matter so much *why* the City States and their mad Overseer had ended that work. What mattered was that it never happen again.

"Are you okay, Isaak?"

"I grieve, lord. And I rage."

"Aye. Me too."

A Scout cleared his voice outside. "Lord Rudolfo? We've taken a prisoner at the edge of camp."

He looked up. "Yes?"

"A woman, lord. She came magicked and asking for your protection under the Providence of Kin-Clave."

He smiled but there was no satisfaction in it. Maybe later, when all of this unpleasantness had passed. "Very well. Prepare her for travel."

"Lord?"

"She is to be escorted to the seventh manor. You leave within the hour. The metal man goes with her. Select and magick a half-squad to assist you."

"Yes, lord."

"And fetch me my raven." Rudolfo fell back into the cushions, exhaustion washing over him.

"Lord Rudolfo?" The metal man struggled to his feet, his damaged leg sparking. "Am I leaving you?"

"Yes, Isaak, for bit." He rubbed his eyes. "I wish for you to start that work we spoke of. When I am finished here, I will bring you help."

"Is there anything I can do here?"

The realization fell on him. I could ask him and maybe he would go for me now. I could send him south and west, following the Three Rivers until he reached the walled cities at their deltas, speaking his words and bringing down death. But the thought fled as quickly as it arrived. "I'd be no better than Sethbert."

"Lord?"

He rubbed his eyes again and yawned. "Pack your tools, Isaak. You're leaving soon."

The metal man packed, then swung the heavy pouch over his shoulder. Rudolfo climbed to his feet.

"The woman you will be traveling with is Jin Li Tam of House Li Tam. I would have you bear a message to her."

Isaak said nothing, waiting.

"Tell her she chose well and that I will come to her when I am finished here."

"Yes, lord."

Rudolfo followed Isaak out of the tent. His raven awaited, its feathers glossy and dark as a wooded midnight. He took it from the scout's steady hands.

"When you reach the seventh manor," he told his scout, "tell my steward there that Isaak—the metal man—bears my grace."

The scout nodded once and left. Isaak looked at Rudolfo. His mouth opened and closed; no words came out.

Rudolfo held the raven close, stroking its back with his finger. "I will see you soon, Isaak. Start your work. I'll send the others when I've freed them. You've a library to re-build."

"Thank you," the metal man finally said.

Rudolfo nodded. The scout and the metal man left. Gregoric returned, wiping the apprentice's blood from his hands.

"Sethbert wants his man back," Rudolfo said. "I've already seen to it, lord."

Somewhere on the edge of camp, Rudolfo thought, a stolen pony ambled its way home bearing a cloth-wrapped burden. "Very well. Magick the rest of your Gypsy Scouts."

"I've seen to that as well, lord."

He looked at Gregoric and felt a pride that burned brighter than his grief or his rage. "You're a good man."

Rudolfo pulled a thread from the sleeve of his rainbow robe. This time, no other message. This time, no question. He tied the scarlet thread of war to the foot of his darkest angel. When he finished, he whispered no words and he did not fling his messenger at the sky. It leaped from his hands on its own and sped away like a black arrow. He watched it fly until he realized Gregoric had spoken.

"Gregoric?" he asked.

"You should rest, lord," the chief of his Gypsy Scouts said again. "We can handle this first battle without you."

"Yes, I should," Rudolfo said. But he knew there would be time enough for rest—perhaps even a life-time of rest—after he won the war.❧

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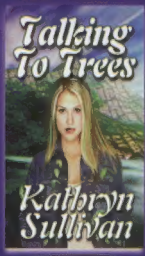

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